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HALVES.

A Novel.

BY

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ETC. ETC.

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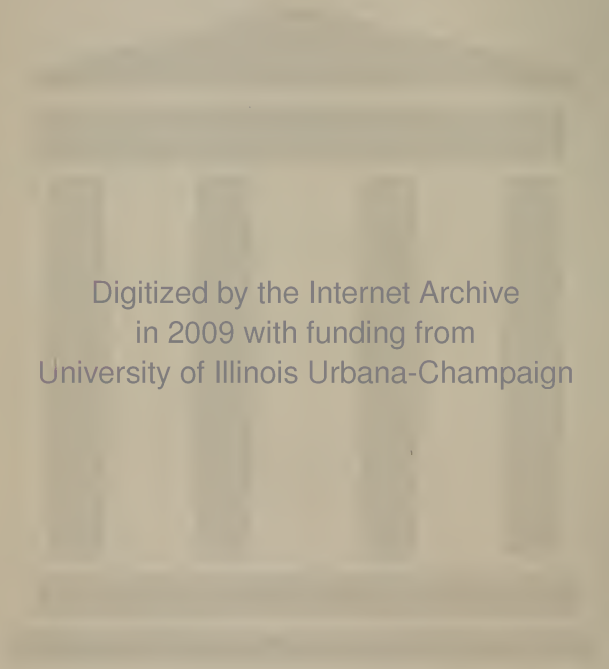
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HALVES.



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HALVES.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. RAEBURN HAS MISGIVINGS.

IF I had not been a mere lad at the time of which I am speaking, I think I might have felt a greater pity for Mark Raeburn than even for his unhappy brother. As it was, the spectacle of that bowed and broken man, defamed (for I never believed him guilty of the paltry crime of which his sister-in-law had accused him), disgraced, and menaced with expulsion from the only roof on which he had a claim for shelter, monopolised all my compassion. I would have written at once to my uncle Hastings, upon whom I could count to afford his old

friend at least a temporary home at Stanbrook, but some instinct warned me in the first place to consult "Brother Alec" himself upon the point. After that painful scene at table, however, he had withdrawn himself into his own room, and when I knocked at the door, and said I had a few words to say to him, he answered, "Write them down." Accordingly I did so, and pushed the paper under the door. A minute afterwards it was unlocked, and the old man stood before me. He had evidently been seeking comfort from Chico, who, standing on his shoulder, appeared to be administering it at that moment in his ear, and with some success; or perhaps it was the sense that I was genuinely interested in his well-being that had called up a smile on his chapfallen face. Through the half-opened door I could see, sitting as though on guard, on the chair by his little desk (which he had never, by-the-by, been seen to use), the redoubtable Fury, with bowed legs and turned-out toes. The dog

looked more hideously truculent than ever; the bones and scraps, which, since his master's fall, had taken the place of those succulent beefsteaks, had not quenched his spirit; but he graciously acknowledged my presence by blinking his bleared eyes and moving his stump of a tail just once, much as one coachman salutes another with his elbow. On the floor were the two empty boxes in which the serpents had been done to death; and on the mantelpiece hung the cold and ashless pipe which had been Brother Alec's solace in so many troubles, but was denied him now. Smoking in the house, much less in his room, was strictly forbidden under the new *régime*; and indeed, if it had not been so, it was a question whether he possessed the money wherewith to purchase tobacco.

"Your note is kindly meant, Mr. Sheddon," said he, holding out his thin fingers, "and I thank you for it. But to have written it was an imprudence. Nothing

offends the powerful so much as the aiding those who have incurred their displeasure."

I answered him, honestly enough, that I did not estimate Mrs. Raeburn's displeasure at the value of one of her own bottles of ginger wine; and that I felt very sorry and distressed about what had happened.

"Well, it was still kind in you—very— young sir, if no imprudence," replied he, earnestly. "You must not write to your uncle in my behalf; but your suggestion is nevertheless of service to me. If I were to call at Stanbrook to-morrow morning, the rector would be at home, I suppose?"

"Yes," said I, eagerly, "and I am sure will be most pleased to welcome you, not as a caller only, but as a guest. Mrs. Hastings, like himself, has a great regard for you."

A sad smile flickered on the old man's face.

"Aye; that is the chief thing, lad, is it

not? We may mean well to our friends, but the wife must mean well too, for anything to come of it beyond fair speeches."

Then when I did not answer, since I knew that he was referring to his brother, "Good night," said he, "once more I thank you;" and he gently closed the door.

His words set me thinking of the attorney, and caused me to take more note of his behaviour than usual when I went downstairs.

It was clear that Mark Raeburn was very ill at ease. He had been beaten by his better half, but he was not submissive. He had not the courage to make an attempt to recover his Alsace, but he very openly showed his resentment for its loss. He manifested an unwonted disposition for bickering, as if striving to assert in small matters the authority he had lost in great ones. Mrs. Raeburn, on the other hand, was yielding; she reminded me of some full-grown person who holds a door against

which a child is pushing—she let him have his way a little, knowing that she had only to put her foot down to negative all his puny efforts. As a general rule, she had not patience enough to sustain a hypocritical part; her high-principled arguments, as compared with her high-handed acts, were but as a half-pennyworth of bread to an intolerable amount of sack. But that night her utterances would have formed headings for the pages of a moral copy-book. Meek she could not be, but she was virtuous and didactic to a degree that she had never before approached, and I could see John taking copious notes of the performance for future representation. Splashed and flooded with moral aphorisms, the attorney still contrived to keep the embers of his wrath alive, and as his wife was retiring from the drawing-room, he fired this parting shot; “Mind, Matilda, I will not have that letter written to-morrow.”

“What letter?” inquired she, putting

down her candlestick and confronting him.

“That letter you meant to send to London about the bird.”

“I never told you I was going to send a letter.”

“No, but I know it, nevertheless. If there is anything wrong about Alec’s conduct, which nobody believes who knows him, except yourself, it shall not be hunted out by you.”

“Do you suppose, then, that my own sense of the family disgrace, sir, would not keep me silent?”

“Yes, I do; when you dislike a person you stick at nothing.”

“John, what has your father been drinking to-night?” inquired Mrs. Raeburn, significantly.

“Nothing, ma’am; it is native spirit,” added John, in a lower but by no means inaudible tone. To do him justice, in all these domestic quarrels John was always on

the side of the weak—that is, on his father's side.

“It is not my intention to write a letter, Mr. Raeburn,” continued the lady, once more taking up the candlestick, but this time with a trembling hand. “Whatever my sense of public duty may have dictated in the case of that unhappy man upstairs, I could not so far forget the connection which unhappily exists between us, as to consign him, by my own act, to a felon's doom.”

Despite the attorney's now habitual potations, he had still gleams of his native astuteness, and it is my opinion that his wife had had the intention in her mind with which he had taxed her, otherwise the sense of defeat implied in her tone and manner would not have been so marked; an incautious phrase which she added, as she swept out of the room, corroborated this view. “At all events, mind this, Mr. Raeburn, that that bird goes back to its rightful owners to-morrow morning.”

But when the morning came, neither the bird nor his master were to be found; the bed had apparently been slept in, and his dog was still sleeping, as usual, beneath the bed, but Brother Alec had left the house along with his feathered favourite. I guessed at once that he had started thus early for Stanbrook, taking Chico with him to insure its safety (for nobody who valued his life would have meddled with Fury), but I kept that information to myself, and watched Mrs. Raeburn's troubled face with no little satisfaction. For some reason or other, this sudden flitting of her brother-in-law was unwelcome to her. Perhaps she resented his not waiting at the "Priory" until he should have been turned out of it; or perhaps she feared the gossip of the servants' hall, for her classic brow was gloomy throughout the morning meal, and her tongue maintained an unwonted silence. Her husband had given expression to one pregnant remark.

"Well, madam, I hope you are satisfied

at last, since you have driven my own brother out of my house," to which she had responded nothing; and now the attorney was silent also.

"Don't you think," John observed innocently, "that it would be well to drag the pond?" But even to that valuable suggestion, designed, doubtless, to put everybody at their ease, there was no response.

In giving reins to her dislike for her late unhappy guest, Mrs. Raeburn had committed, what was not unusual with her when her prejudices were excited, a great social mistake, and she herself had become aware of it. It would have been a much wiser, although not a less cruel, course to have graduated her proceedings against Brother Alec, and to have rendered her house uncomfortable rather than intolerable to him. His present abrupt departure from it was likely to have quite as ill an effect in the neighbourhood, as though the fact of his poverty, and the family failure in the way

of expectations, had been publicly proclaimed. As for me, knowing that he was where he would be well cared for, I was quite content to miss the old man's woe-worn face, and to be spared the witnessing his humiliation; but it was sad to watch the melancholy of Gertrude, to whom I had had no opportunity of revealing whither he had gone, and who sat with her untasted food before her, full of piteous thoughts. When the front-door bell was heard to ring, she started up in haste, then sat down again, white and trembling; John's mischievous words had, I think, taken possession of her mind, and she was apprehensive of some fatal news. However, nothing had arrived but the post, that at all times brought many business letters for Mr. Raeburn, which, after a glance at their superscription, he generally took with him unopened into the office. On this occasion there was one for Mrs. Raeburn, the official seal of which let her know at a glance from whence it came.

"This is no fault of mine, Mark, understand," said she, holding it in her hand, "but here is a letter from the Zoological Society." That she should have thought it necessary to make excuses for herself showed how greatly dissatisfied she was with the course events were taking.

"Pass it here," said the attorney, gruffly. "I suppose it will devolve on me to get us out of the scrape into which your meddling has brought us."

"Don't say *us*, I beg," was the lady's haughty reply, as she for once obeyed her lord; "because your brother steals a bird——"

"Idiot!" exclaimed the attorney, starting to his feet with an oath. "What irreparable ruin has your temper brought us?"

"Idiot! temper! ruin!" repeated Mrs. Raeburn, in a voice trembling with rage and apprehension, "are you mad, Mark?"

"Yes, madam, or nearly so, thanks to you. Read this. No, I will read it myself

aloud, since it is only just that my brother Alec should be proved guiltless of this stupid charge in the presence of the same persons before whom you accused him.

“‘MADAM,—I have the great pleasure of informing you that the unpleasant surmises which we were compelled to entertain respecting your brother-in-law’s possession of the night-parrot about which you wrote to us, have been wholly removed, and in the most satisfactory manner. The bird that had been bespoken by the Society from Lima, and was expected by “The Java,” died, it seems, at that port before the vessel sailed; while, from inquiries we have instituted, it turns out that, by a curious coincidence, another specimen of this rare genus, the property of the great Peruvian merchant, Mr. Pittsburg, came over in that very ship, and was doubtless presented by that gentleman to Mr. Alexander Raeburn. I am directed by the committee of the Society to express its deep regret for the unfortunate error in which it

has been led, and to apologise for the same.’”

“Well, I am sure it is a great satisfaction to all of us that the imputation upon Mr. Alexander’s moral character has been thus satisfactorily removed,” observed Mrs. Raeburn. She turned towards Gertrude, not so much in appeal to her, I believe, as to avoid her husband’s gaze, which was fixed upon her with rigid displeasure, and Gertrude answered, coldly :

“For my part, Mrs. Raeburn, I never needed any proof of my cousin’s innocence.”

“Nor did any one else in their senses !” exclaimed the attorney, vehemently.

“Thank you, sir ; since, however, you have already called me an idiot, this new compliment is a mere redundance,” observed Mrs. Raeburn. It was surprising to me that, under the provocation she had received, she used such fine language, which it was her custom to do only when her temper was under control ; but the fact was that her

keen intelligence had at once guessed the full signification of the letter that had just been read, and understood the cause of the unwonted fire that gleamed in her husband's eyes.

The wits of men are sharpened by their self-interest, and the attorney and his wife were the first of us to be cognisant of the terrible mistake wherein they had possibly fallen with respect to their relative, and which this communication from town suggested.

"You cannot, at all events, be overburthened with sense, madam," continued Mr. Raeburn, testily, "if you do not understand who the great Peruvian merchant, Mr. Pittsburg, is likely to be."

"Of course I see that it is possible. I remember that Pittsburg was the name of your brother's partner at Richmond."

"Possible! Is it not certain that Alec and this man are identical; that he adopted, for the purpose of concealment, the name

that happened to be most familiar to him, and yet which would reveal nothing?"

"But why should he adopt an alias, Mark?"

The attorney snorted contemptuously. "How should I know?" were the words he uttered, but what his angry face said was, "It is easy enough to guess, madam; it was to try the genuineness of the affection of his relatives; and a very pretty mess, thanks to you, have we made of that ordeal."

Furious as the attorney was with his wife, yet, as I believe, he was even more irritated with himself, whom he had long felt to be degraded and disgraced as host as well as brother: the sense that a more dutiful and manly course would have brought him fortune and respect was almost maddening him. This last conviction had somehow gained entire possession of him, notwithstanding the comparatively slender ground on which it was built. It

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was, I thought, too, in a hesitating tone, as though she herself had but little confidence in her own words, that Mrs. Raeburn presently observed :

“After all, Mark, we are going much too fast. Mr. Pittsburg, or a Mr. Pittsburg, may have really come over in the ‘Java,’ and given the bird to Mr. Alexander ; and if I knew where he was, I should make a point of instantly writing to your brother, and handsomely apologising for our unfortunate mistake.”

“Yes, by Jove, a regular mucker,” muttered John, whom this conciliatory proposal from his mother convinced at once that she at least was certain that she had been entertaining an angel — or at least what stood for an angel in her eyes, “a man made of money”—unawares. “Why, I might have been the heir to a millionaire, and now I’ve been disinherited by my own mother.”

“You are right there, John,” observed

the attorney, peevishly ; “ for though she chooses to call it *our* mistake, it was nobody’s but her own.”

My habit had made me so familiar with the bickerings of the family that this scene gave me little uneasiness, especially since its chief feature was the discomfiture of Mrs. Raeburn ; nor could I forbear a smile when that lady quietly observed, “ Well, you may call it whose mistake you please, but I beg to say that it was my opinion, from the first, that your brother Alec was a wealthy man.”

“ And that was why you treated him not only as a pauper, I suppose, madam,” responded her husband, contemptuously, “ but as though his poverty were a crime.”

“ I took Mr. Alexander at his word, of course,” replied she, with unabashed coolness. “ How was I to know that his humour was to appear penniless, when he was very rich ? ”

This was said without irritation ; it really

seemed as if her conviction of her brother-in-law's prosperous circumstances had already caused her to regard him with less of animosity ; or was she tutoring herself to play once more towards him a hypocritical part in case it should turn out—though, indeed, that seemed impossible—that matters had not gone too far to be irrevocable.

Nothing else was said till the conclusion of the meal, when, as we three slaves of the law were about, as usual, to troop off together into the office, Mrs. Raeburn called to John, saying, "I want you for a few moments," whereat he made a comical face at me, expressive of apprehension, and followed her out of the room and upstairs, where presently I heard them conversing overhead.

"Do you think it likely, Sheddon," inquired the attorney, suddenly, as I sat at my desk, "that my brother may have gone to Stanbrook?"

His tone was careless enough ; but I noticed that he stopped in the arrange-

ment of his papers while waiting for my reply, as though careful not to lose a word.

“Yes, Mr. Raeburn, I do,” answered I, frankly. “My uncle has always shown himself his friend, as you are aware, and he would naturally apply to him in——”

I was going to say in his calamity, not remembering by whom that had been brought about; but I finished my sentence just in time with “in the present circumstances.”

“I hope it is so,” answered the attorney. “The rector is an old friend of the family”—here he glanced up at the tin box that held my uncle’s papers—“and would, I am sure, do his best towards a reconciliation.”

Though the attorney was looking at me very hard, I could not prevent my shoulders moving towards my ears, to which they so naturally gravitated.

“You do not think, then, that my brother will ever be reconciled, or come back again to us?” inquired Mr. Raeburn, with a sigh.

It was not the sigh, but the fact that a man so many years my senior should be asking my opinion on such a matter, and be so moved by it, that touched me. I remembered, too, that, though Mark had been weak in defence of our departed guest, he had not been designedly unkind.

"I do not think your brother will come back, sir," answered I, gently.

The attorney did not reply ; but I could read in his face that he thought the same. He looked utterly cast down, more depressed even than pained ; and the blotches in his cheeks, which were generally obscured by his high colour, told their sad tale very clearly. He went on sorting his papers, and I with my task of copying out some deed in silence, when presently a scream ran through the house, so loud that it penetrated through the double doors of the office.

"Good Heavens ! what's that, Sheddon ?"
The words expressed some excitement, but

his tone was that of one who, already overwhelmed by misfortune, has little more to fear, nor did he stir from his seat.

But, as for me, I leaped to my feet and rushed from the room like a madman, fearing some misfortune had befallen Gertrude. Guided by the screams, which still continued, I ran upstairs and found that they proceeded from the room of our late guest, the door of which had been already opened and was surrounded by a little throng, none of whom, however, ventured within side, for a very manifest reason. Upon the chair of Brother Alec's desk (which, when not filled by himself, was generally in the occupation of his bull-dog) stood John Raeburn, with a bundle of papers in his hands, crying, "Help! help!" at the top of his voice, and staring with terror-stricken eyes at Fury, who was standing on the hearth-rug with legs a-kimbo growling hideously, and already devouring him with his saucer eyes.

"Bring the gun, Sheddon," yelled the

unhappy youth, so soon as he caught sight of me. "He'll tear me to pieces else before your eyes."

This appeal for my assistance seemed to excite the truculent animal as though it had really understood its nature, and I thought that it would have leaped at John upon the spot and made an end of him.

"Tell your husband to get the gun," whispered I to Mrs. Raeburn, who stood wringing her hands in agony at the perilous situation of her firstborn. "In the meantime I will try to get the beast away."

Then I went into the room, a little way, and called "Fury, Fury," in my most seductive tones.

The dog only acknowledged my presence with another growl, as though he would have said, "Don't you interfere, this is my business;" yet he sat down on his haunches, like one in some measure released from his responsibility, and dropping his cannibalistic air seemed to "watch" his enemy, like a

very determined sentinel who has his orders to fire on his prisoner if he moves, and means to obey them.

“Keep quite quiet, John,” said I; “don’t move a muscle.”

“That’s all very fine,” returned John, bitterly; “but a fellow can’t help it when he’s all of a shake. If I hadn’t jumped up here, I do believe that infernal beast would have swallowed me by this time.”

“But how came you here at all?”

“Oh—I came to look after something. My mother sent me for it,” explained John in a tone of abject apology, which, since he kept his eyes fixed on the dog, seemed to be addressed to that animal himself. “How the deuce was I to know that this brute was under the bed.”

At this moment we heard a confused noise in the hall below; then footsteps on the stairs, while one of the female domestics exclaimed, “Oh, thanks to goodness!”

I thought, of course, Mr. Raeburn was

bringing the gun, and cried out to him, without turning my head, not to shoot the dog until the last extremity. "Remember," said I, "how fond your brother is of the creature——"

But here, to my astonishment, Fury suddenly abandoned his post, and with a yelp of joy ran frantically towards the door. At the same time a grave, stern voice, which I did not recognise, cried, "What are you doing, John, in my room?" and, looking round, I saw Brother Alec standing in the doorway.

CHAPTER II.

NEW TERMS.

“WHAT are you doing, I say, in my room?” inquired its proprietor, for the second time, of the unhappy John, who, still standing on the chair, exhibited almost as piteous a spectacle as when threatened with immediate extinction by the jaws of Fury.

“John is here, Mr. Alexander, by my directions,” interposed Mrs. Raeburn, who with great presence of mind had already dismissed the servants from the scene. “I take the whole responsibility of his presence on my shoulders.”

“I should have concluded as much, madam, had you not confessed it,” observed

Brother Alec, drily. "It still remains, however, for you to explain why you sent him."

To look at them, and hear them speak, these two persons might have been said to have changed characters since their last meeting, save that it was as impossible for Mrs. Raeburn to be mild as for Brother Alec to be insolent; her manner was deprecating almost to cringing, though the effort that it cost her to be so showed like a strong limb through a flimsy garment, while that of her brother-in-law was contemptuously stern. It was as though Goneril, after all her cruelties, had suddenly discovered that her father's abdication was invalid, and King Lear had come to his own again, not with triumph, indeed—far from it; with broken hopes, and a wounded heart; but with full knowledge of the baseness of his kindred, and power to punish it.

"My explanation, Mr. Alexander, of John's presence here is simple enough.

When you left us this morning so suddenly, to our extreme distress and dismay, we knew not what to think. We were all consumed with apprehension, lest, resenting an imputation for which I alone was to blame, and which I regret above measure, as being utterly false and unfounded, you might have taken some desperate step. For my part, I honestly confess that I feared you had left the Priory for ever. Under those circumstances, I thought it my duty to place all your effects under lock and key until such time as it might suit you to send for them."

"But my desk, madam, *was* under lock and key—at least when I left it this morning. It is now open, I perceive; and your son has possessed himself of a portion of its contents. It is curious that I, though absent, am able to offer, you see"—here he looked round upon the family circle, which, I now noticed for the first time, had an addition to it in the person of my uncle

Hastings—"a more complete solution of this proceeding than Mrs. Raeburn herself. Moved by suspicions of her own, or by information received from others, with respect to my possession of property, she resolved to convince herself of the fact by an examination of my private papers."

"Dear me, dear me, I hope not," said the rector, jingling the silver in his pocket, as he was wont to do when perturbed in mind. "You must take care what you say in your excitement, my dear friend; you must really take care."

"Look at the lady's face, and judge for yourself, Hastings," answered the other, coolly; "or look at this," and stepping forward, he plucked from John Raeburn's hand the paper it still mechanically grasped. "This is a statement of my property as at present invested—a document which had, doubtless, a very great interest for some of my relatives here, and which it is a pity, for their own sakes, that they did not obtain

a sight of earlier." Bitter as was the old man's tone, it still spoke less of bitterness than of an inflexible purpose; and the stress that he had laid upon the words, "at present," had a significance it was impossible to misunderstand.

"I leave the Priory to-day, with my good friend the rector, here——"

"I am sorry for it, Alec," interrupted the attorney, speaking for the first time; "genuinely sorry, but not surprised. We have deserved it."

"You are right, Mark," answered the other, sternly, "and you are the one to blame. Your wife acted according to her nature; we do not look for gentleness in the wolf, or mercy in the wild-cat——"

"'Pon my life, sir, I can't stand this," interposed the rector, vehemently; "you put me in a cold perspiration. I promised you, as a matter of friendship, and in hopes to be the means of reconciliation between you and your family, to accompany you hither,

and afterwards elsewhere ; but I must go away if you use—dear me—such very extraordinary language.”

“I have done, Hastings, with invectives ; and I am sorry I indulged in them in your presence ; I owe it to you to at least make your presence here as painless and unembarassing as I can. I was about to say, Mark, that you, whose nature, as I used to know it, is kind and genial, have been most to blame, since you have permitted it to be warped by another ; since you have looked on with folded hands while wrong and insult were heaped upon one, who had a claim upon you for protection, such as even this dog here would scarcely have ignored. However, I am not here to reproach you. I am come, accompanied by my good friend here, to set forth my future intentions, without possibility of mistake on either side, and also—of this, too, you may be quite certain—without hope of change. I have brought Mr. Hastings to be a witness to them ; and I

wish, besides, that all those who have been acquainted with my treatment in this house"—here his voice failed him for the first time—"should also be present. Shall we adjourn to the drawing-room, madam, or may I have my say out here?"

"You may do just as you please, sir," answered Mrs. Raeburn—her face had grown deadly pale, and now and again she moistened her thin lips with her tongue, like one in fever—"this room is good enough for me."

We all six, therefore, remained where we were, in Brother Alec's room; he himself standing by the desk, the rifling of which had nearly cost his nephew his life, and now bade fair to lose him his inheritance; John sitting, with disconcerted face, on the arm of the chair, the seat of which his mother filled; and the rest of us standing, with attentive looks, save Mark, who, turning his back upon us all, leant his head upon the chimney-piece, and listened without sign.

“I am not about to speak of late events,” commenced the old man in a firm voice, “and still less of that far-back past, Mark, the remembrance of which was once so dear to me. I will not utter one word of reproach, for some hearts here feel already self-reproach, I see, and others no words of mine can move. But, in my own defence, I must needs say that I did not return to my native land with any idea of putting your affection to the proof; I had no doubt of its genuineness, no fear of its shortcomings whatever. But not knowing even whether you were still alive, I kept the same feigned name upon the voyage which I had always borne in Peru, so that, in case I had found you dead, and that you had left offspring, I might, without making known to them the fact of my relationship, until I saw fit to do so, judge of their characters for myself, and make up my mind in what proportion they should severally inherit my wealth. It was a foolish

fancy, doubtless, and bitterly have I paid for it, since, if I had shipped under my own name, the fact of the fortune I had acquired in Peru would probably soon have come to your knowledge, and I should never have suspected that it was my riches alone that had evoked your welcome."

"Mr. Alexander is taking a very morbid view of human nature," observed Mrs. Raeburn, looking towards the rector with a sickly smile.

But my uncle, with all his gallantry and disposition to make matters pleasant, moved not a muscle in encouragement, while Brother Alec continued, as though no interruption had taken place.

"When I found, to my great joy, that you were alive, Mark, and still in the very place where we had grown up together from childhood, I came home impatient to embrace you, leaving my luggage and other property in town. That was another cir-

cumstance which tended eventually to mislead you as to my true position; but, as I tell you, it was wholly undesigned. When I reached this house, Heaven is my witness that I had no thought of any concealment of the state of my affairs. I was almost grieved—so tenderly I felt towards you—to find you prosperous, since the property I designed to at once make over to you, in accordance with our agreement—the half, that is, of my whole estate—would not prove so acceptable to you as though you had been in greater need of it. But I had not been an hour under your roof, when, on the part of one member of this family at least, I began to suspect the genuineness of the welcome that had been accorded to me. Even when I became convinced of this, however, it did not alter my intentions. This person, I reflected, was not connected with me by ties of kindred; if only my brother's arms were held open to me, that should be sufficient.

I remembered how they had clasped me to his breast when we had parted years ago ; they were still of the same flesh and blood as then. Let me not, however, inflict unnecessary pain. It is enough to say that I began to have my doubts of you, yourself, Mark ; and I resolved to try you. If you had acknowledged our agreement, even though you had excused yourself from fulfilling the obligation it involved ; if you had expressed to me your sense of the indignities that were heaped upon me, when it appeared that I was poor, and had acknowledged your powerlessness to prevent them, that would have been something, and I should have forgiven the rest.” Here the speaker’s voice trembled so excessively that he was compelled to pause ; and Mrs. Raeburn took advantage of the circumstance to introduce an observation.

“ When speaking of putting my husband on his trial, Mr. Alexander, you have omitted to state that you accomplished this by means

of a deception. You told us that you were wealthy, and then acknowledged that you were poor. It was your duplicity, not your poverty, that turned me against you. Since Mr. Hastings is your listener, it is but right that he should understand that there was a reason for my change of conduct. He should be made acquainted with all the facts—if with any.”

“Madam, if I conceal anything from Mr. Hastings of what has happened here,” returned Brother Alec, coldly, “it is for Mark’s sake. As to telling you that I was wealthy, I deny it. Your greedy wish was father to that thought.”

“You said that the ropes and tackle of that box of silver had held firm, when you knew all the time that the bottom had come out,” observed Mrs. Raeburn, reproachfully.

“I do not pretend, madam, that I took any pains to undeceive you in the matter. And I will own that, when I discovered your utter heartlessness, I did deceive you.

Let us not, however, waste time in recriminations. I will proceed at once to the business that has brought me back this morning. This paper, about which your son John yonder has shown himself so curious, is, as I have said, Mark, the statement of my property, as at present invested—about one hundred thousand pounds.”

A shock seemed to pervade Mrs. Raeburn’s system, as though she had incautiously laid hold of an electric-eel.

“The loss of the box of silver bars, which happened as I have described, was serious; but”—and here there was for the first time a touch of malice in the speaker’s tone—“it was not the only box. Well, I call you all to witness that every shilling of my fortune, with the exception of a small proportion of it, which will never come to you, Mark, nor to any member of your family, I am about at once to invest in a life annuity. This resolve of mine, which is unalterable, must needs include Gertrude here, which I regret;

but I am happy to think that she has a fortune of her own, which renders the matter of less consequence."

For my part, I thought this very unjust and harsh. Gertrude had always behaved towards the old man with affectionate solicitude, and had even been led into contention—a thing most repugnant to her nature—with her hostess, solely upon his account; and now the Raeburns had offended him, he must needs include her also, because she happened to be a relative of theirs, in the same sweeping condemnation. A tinge of heightened colour stole into the dear girl's cheeks at the mention of her name, but a quiet smile was her only answer. To my great surprise, however, Mrs. Raeburn spoke up for Gertrude.

"You will do as you please, Mr. Alexander, with your own, of course; and though your displeasure with me and mine is most unreasonable, good taste forbids me to make any remonstrances; but, with regard

to your cousin, she has always been your friend, and, indeed, I may say, has been devoted to you——”

“Mrs. Raeburn,” interposed Gertrude with dignity, “I must beg of you to make no appeal to cousin Alec upon my account. As he very justly observes, I am in no want of his money, and whatever service I have been able to do him, was done, as he is well aware, without hope or wish for reward.”

“Quite right ! quite right !” assented the old man, coldly. “If Gertrude had been of that sort, she should have been duly recompensed.”

The words “that sort,” uttered, I must say, in a very contemptuous tone, appeared possibly to Mrs. Raeburn to have some personal significance ; or, perhaps, now that all hope of reconciliation with her brother-in-law seemed to have died out, she saw no reason for repressing any longer the lava-tide of wrath that was pent-up within her.

“And so, sir, you have only come back to us to spit out your malice, and have brought Mr. Hastings with you in order to be a witness to our humiliation. From you, that is no more than I should have expected; but as to the rector, here——”

“Madam, madam,” interposed my uncle with nervous vehemence, “you are altogether wrong. If I had known that your brother-in-law would have said so much, I would have seen him—I mean I would certainly not have made one of your family party on this occasion. But, indeed, he has quite another object than that of vituperation. Why the deuce don’t you come to it, Alec?”

For the first time throughout this scene, which had certainly not been destitute of ludicrous situations, I saw a grin relax John’s muscles; the rector’s manifest discomfort and irritation would, indeed, if the circumstances had been less serious, have been the very height of comedy.

“You are right, Hastings, and I apologise to you for having let my tongue run when I promised to be silent,” said Brother Alec, frankly. “And you, madam, would, I admit, have just cause for complaint, if my mission here were only to reproach you. I came, however, to make a proposition, which, as it will certainly have its advantages for you, you will probably accept. Though rich, I am, alas! homeless; and it is my wish, notwithstanding all that has happened here, to still reside under this roof.”

It was not only Mrs. Raeburn that started this time; an electric shock seemed to pass through the whole circle, with the exception of the rector, who had been already informed of the suggestion, and to whom, also, it would not appear so strange as it did to us, who had been witnesses to the treatment of our guest at the Priory. The attorney was most moved of all, and turned upon his brother a face full of tender surprise.

“This proposition, if accepted, will, however, no matter how it may be carried out, in no way affect the disposition of my property,” continued the other, firmly, as if in answer to this look. “Being myself necessarily ignorant of the cost of English house-keeping, I have made inquiries upon the matter, and am informed that one thousand pounds will be a handsome annual allowance for a person in my position to allow for his maintenance in a fitting way, and I propose to pay that sum.”

“Very liberal, I am sure,” muttered Mrs. Raeburn, approvingly, but looking with great disfavour at my uncle.

My impression is, that she credited him with having estimated the cost of his friend's keep at the amount in question, and with which, large as it was, she was dissatisfied; whereas my excellent relative was utterly uninformed upon such matters, and would probably have declined the post of arbitrator in any case. The fact was, as

I afterwards discovered, that my aunt had been appealed to, and suggested five hundred a year as ample, and that Brother Alec had doubled it.

“Then I am to understand that this arrangement meets your views, madam?” continued he. “Mrs. Raeburn is the housekeeper, and therefore I appeal to her, Mark,” he added apologetically; to which the attorney only answered with a feeble smile. In his brother’s presence it would have been idle indeed for him to have laid claim to domestic authority.

“The arrangement is satisfactory, Mr. Alexander,” replied Mrs. Raeburn. “Most satisfactory, I am sure, to us; not only upon pecuniary grounds.”

“Those are the grounds alone on which I wish it to be transacted, madam,” interrupted her brother-in-law, sternly. “Let us consider, then, this business settled. I shall go to town this morning, but shall probably return to-morrow, or the next day, to take

up my residence here. Hastings" — here he pulled out his watch—"we have not much time to spare before the train starts; if you will wait for me below-stairs while I pack up a few things, I will be with you in ten minutes."

At this hint we all withdrew from the apartment; but as I was going out last, the old man touched my arm.

"Will you help me to fill my carpet-bag, Sheddon?"

Of course I assented, though I was surprised at the request, for Brother Alec was singularly independent of such assistance, and even in his palmy days had rarely summoned a servant for any purpose. When the door had closed upon the others, however, and I saw him sink into his accustomed chair, very white and trembling, it was easy to guess why he needed help. The previous scene, for which he had summoned all his strength, had completely exhausted him.

“Dear Mr. Raeburn,” said I, “you are very unwell, and quite unfit, as it seems to me, for a long day’s travel.”

“No, no, lad, I shall do,” said he, rousing himself with effort, and pointing out the few articles he wished put up.

I obeyed his directions; yet really apprehensive of what might occur, again requested him to remember his debilitated condition.

“At least,” said I, “put off your departure for to-day, Mr. Raeburn.”

“Not I, lad,” answered he, firmly. Then added, with a smile, “It would be hardly safe to stay under this roof with Mark’s wife, with my will unsigned, and while Mark is my heir-at-law.”

He spoke in jest, but there was a bitterness in his tone that made it half earnest, and gave his hearer a shudder.

CHAPTER III.

DR. WILDE.

It was several days before Brother Alec returned to the Priory, and during his absence there were great alterations and improvements made in the house for his future behoof. A small room adjoining his own (but on the other side from mine) was made to communicate with it, and the Kirkdale upholsterer was directed to fit it up as a little boudoir. Thus, in case the old man should fail in health, which seemed only too probable, he would have his sitting-room upstairs, while the bed-room itself was supplied with some handsome articles of furniture—of which, indeed, it stood in no little

need. "Business," however, as John observed, "was not carried on as usual during the alterations." Mrs. Raeburn was not herself. Her domineering manner was gone, her incisive speech had become mild, she ceased to toss her head back in her impatient equine manner. The impression on the family circle, which did not, however, extend to the domestics, to whom it was whispered she was more "cantankerous" than ever, was that the mistress of the house was bent on making herself agreeable—"going into training," her son called it—against the return of her guest. This explanation of so great a change was not, however, completely satisfactory. That she should be civil and conciliatory to Brother Alec was only to be expected, but why should she give herself the trouble to be so to ourselves, and even to her husband? Perhaps the consciousness that it was owing to her own misbehaviour in this respect that the prize of her brother-in-law's wealth had been lost to her and

hers, might have made her penitent and humble ; but that again seemed highly improbable. In the meantime, we all took advantage of this favourable state of things and basked in the unexpected sunshine, with two exceptions. The attorney was in very low spirits, and took more than ever to his usual remedy for them ; and the parrot pined. Chico, who had accompanied his master from Stanbrook, had been placed in Gertrude's charge, who lavished every attention on the bird, but he was dull and listless. He would not eat his customary fruits, and while they lay in untasted profusion about him, would inconsequentially croak forth, "All gone ! all gone !" in sepulchral tones. In spite of his scarlet plumage he had a widowed look, and in consequence of certain snatches of lugubrious rhyme which he had picked up—it was said from myself—was reported to be composing an *In Memoriam*. The bull-dog, on the other hand, who had never been gay and festive, like Chico, took his master's ab-

sence philosophically enough. It being out of the question to let him remain in his old quarters, where he would have made mincemeat of the upholsterer and his men, he passed most of his days in the drawing-room, enjoying the utmost respect of all who met him there, and utterly unconscious of the incongruity of his position.

Notwithstanding the change for the better in Mrs. Raeburn's behaviour towards myself, it struck me that I had become somewhat more isolated from the rest of the family than had heretofore been the case. The attorney and his wife and son now held frequent councils together, to which I was not admitted, nor did John unbosom himself concerning them with his usual charming frankness. This circumstance would in no case have distressed me, but as it was, it was above measure welcome, since it left Gertrude and me alone together. They might plot and plan as they liked for what I cared—for I did not believe, what Mrs.

Raeburn would have had me credit, that their talk was all about the domestic alterations—and welcome. Like the great national poet, who,

“His arms about his dearie, O,
Bade warl’ly cares and warl’ly men
To a’ gae tapsalterie, O,”

I cared nothing about the family schemes, provided only they should not be devised to part me from Gertrude. At the same time, I protest, though a poet myself, to whom the licence of the profession might fairly have been permitted, I never ventured to put my arm round that young lady. Matters were very pleasant and comfortable, however, because the love was understood between us, and when once that foundation has been established, conversation of all kinds has its charms. Among other things, we talked, of course, of our expected guest.

“Why my poor cousin should wish to

come back again to the Priory after what he has suffered here," observed she, "I cannot guess, Harry !"

"I can," said I. "In the first place, where else is he to go to? At his age he cannot make new friends, nor can his money purchase them; it can only purchase ease and comfort, which await him here. And though he has an enemy in this house, he has his true friends also. One especially, who, I am sure, is a great attraction to him. If I had been in his case, and been treated ten times worse, I should still prefer to live at the Priory if you were its inmate, Gerty."

To this compliment, instead of a burst of gratitude, I received this reply, which will explain how matters stood between us :

"You! Yes, of course you would, sir; but then you are not cousin Alec."

When the old man returned he looked as though he had come back, not to live with us, but to die. His appearance shocked

us all, and probably his sister-in-law as much as any, since the shorter his span of life, the less often would his quarterly payments enrich the domestic exchequer. In a moment of sentiment, I heard her murmur to Gertrude, "What an enormous annuity your poor dear cousin must have got!"

And, curiously enough, he himself almost expressed as much. "I do assure you, my dear Sheddon," said he, with a faint touch of his old humour, "the annuity people thought I was tricking them. Everybody does look as ill as they can, it seems, when bent on such a business, and they were of opinion that I rather overdid the thing. It took all your uncle's respectability to carry me through with it."

The jest was a sad one, and the sadder because it reminded me of those early days when the old man had been full of jests. It was hard to believe that scarcely a year had elapsed since he had arrived among us, tolerably hale to look at, and with a

flow of good spirits that had benefited our social atmosphere, as the Gulf Stream is said to warm the climate. If anybody chilled him—by the expression of what he deemed harsh or heartless sentiments—he had always had a vigorous reply for such ; but all that was now over. His mental powers seemed to be, in a manner, palsied by the revelation of the baseness of his relatives, or, rather, of his brother—for I think that it was through him alone that the fatal wound had been inflicted ; and the failure of his physical strength, which the hardships and anxieties of his life in America had, moreover, tried severely, was, doubtless, owing to the same cause. He was but a year older than his brother, yet, in spite of the effects of Mark's bad habit, which was growing more and more apparent, he looked his senior by ten years.

Of course there was no longer any question of whether our guest at the Priory should have medical advice or no. He

would still have preferred to do without it, but Mrs. Raeburn “insisted” upon her brother-in-law seeking the aid of science—“If not for your own sake, Mr. Alexander, at least for ours,” as she innocently expressed it, intending to be very civil, and using, as such persons do, the first conventional phrase that occurred to her, without respect to its meaning. So Dr. Wilde was accordingly called in. This gentleman, as I have already mentioned, had not been long resident at Kirkdale, and was still designated by its tea-table conversationalists as “our new medical acquisition.” He had purchased, about two years ago, the practice of the late Mr. Rombold, a gentleman who had brought half the present generation of the town into the world, and assisted half the last generation out of it; and though he had by no means so many patients as his predecessor, he had an excellent reputation for skill. What gave Dr. Wilde a great advantage in securing this high

opinion of his neighbours was, that, materially, it was of no consequence to him, since he was possessed of independent means. It pleased him, rather than otherwise, to see many of the ordinary cases that had helped to swell his predecessor's income slip out of his hands into those of Messrs. Bell and Doldrum, the general practitioners. He liked his profession for its own sake, not for what it brought him, and took the same interest in a complicated case as a chess-player in a problem; not, indeed, that he did not feel for the patient—far from it—but when he lost the game—if the sick man died—he took it to heart, and spent long hours over the matter still, trying to discover how it was that he had been beaten. Nobody ever complained that Dr. Wilde did not take pains enough, or hurried one case over in order to attend to another, though it was said, by persons who liked to twaddle over sick-beds, that he was too “impetuous.”

With patients also that were pleased to fancy themselves ill, he was not a favourite, for he was very impatient with them, and would "neglect" the richest of them in a very unhandsome manner, for the sake of some wretched creature in Tinker's Alley, who happened to have "a complication." But he generally brought the wretch "through," and the rich man recovered without his aid.

Dr. Wilde possessed other elements of popularity besides his means and his skill. He was a bachelor, and still young, which made him, socially, very "eligible." He was sometimes called in, it was whispered—but the atmosphere of Kirkdale was electric with scandal—to lady cases which the patients themselves would have had him believe were affections of the heart, that he alone could cure. On the other hand, there was one serious drawback to his character; he was never seen at church, nor even at chapel. Dr. Rombold, who had

had thrice his practice, always made a point of appearing there, at all events till the first lesson, when his man-servant used to hurry in with an urgent face, and carry him off presumably on some professional errand. Dr. Wilde had no such excuse, and his absence was resented. If the gossips had known what I came to know in later years respecting him, they would have resented it still more. The fact which formed the explanation of his shortcoming in this respect, and also of his being so obstinately proof against the charms of the Kirkdale belles, was a curious one. To the hospital with which Dr. Wilde was connected in London, was brought one day a young lady who had been run over in the street; her injuries were severe, and it was long before she was pronounced sufficiently recovered to leave the private room which had been granted for her use at the request of her friends. She had been placed under Wilde's care, at that time a very young practitioner, but who had

already earned for himself a reputation in the profession, and throughout her sickness and convalescence she had been tended by her sister, a very beautiful and attractive girl. With this sister the doctor fell in love. It was not calf-love; he was eight-and-twenty years of age, and by no means given to flirtation. His affection—for passion it could in his case scarcely be called—was returned, nor did any difficulties oppose themselves to their union in the way of money matters. His social position was superior to her own, her father being a Baptist minister, with little means beyond what he derived from the pew-rents of his chapel, while the doctor possessed an independent fortune. For some time things promised fair for the young couple, till, in an evil hour, Dr. Wilde permitted himself to be drawn into a theological argument at the minister's table. To fall out with one's father-in-law is the common lot of humanity, but to quarrel with him before marriage it is possible by prudence to avoid.

Wilde was not imprudent, but he considered it to be his duty at all times to maintain the truth. His antagonist went farther ; he was of opinion that we should not make companionship with the Infidel. Unhappily, the truth of Dr. Wilde was the error arrived at by a religious and thoughtful man whom his friends pronounced to be "crotchety," while the truth of his opponent was the heresy of a Baptist minister. The latter gentleman informed the former that no man who held such opinions, however eligible in other respects, should, with his consent, become the husband of his daughter. The match, he said, which had hitherto been of so goodly a savour to him, now stunk in his nostrils like a brimstone-match.

"Say nothing in haste," pleaded the doctor, who found his own temper very difficult to restrain.

"Don't talk to me of haste, sir !" thundered the heterodox divine ; "this is not a question of time, but of eternity !"

If there was one thing the doctor disliked more than Homœopathy, or the Anti-Vaccination Society, it was the cant of the conventicle, and he said so.

Eventually the minister rang the bell for his daughter. "You must choose," said he, "between this man and me ; nay, between perdition and salvation."

This alternative, for a tender-hearted young person of nineteen years of age, devoted to her lover, but who had gone to chapel regularly, and thought herself to blame when she did not enjoy it, was a terrible one ; but the matter ended in the doctor's dismissal. No one believes in broken hearts in these days, so that we will take it merely as a romantic coincidence that this dutiful and charming girl faded away, and died before three months were out ; yet just before she expired she sent her former lover a letter, which would seem to imply that she attributed her death to their separation ; "only," she was careful

to add, "neither you nor dear papa were to blame."

From that moment the hospital became intolerable to the doctor, though his work was dearer to him than ever; and finding country air and outdoor exercise essential to his well-being, he bought Dr. Rombold's practice at Kirkdale. The profession in London could not conceive "why Wilde should have thus thrown up his chances and gone to bury himself alive in the North;" while the profession at Kirkdale, who were secretly persuaded of his superiority, and were not ignorant of his previous reputation, had no doubt there was "something fishy" in the whole transaction. Even some of the more intelligent Kirkdale laymen thought so too, but were not displeased at the result; they felt like some poor country gentleman who has engaged a classical tutor for his son, at fifty pounds a year, and finds he once held the Ireland scholarship at Oxford.

This brief account of a most remarkable man I have thought it right to set down, since he afterwards played a considerable part in our domestic drama.

CHAPTER IV.

A SECOND PATIENT.

DR. WILDE was known to us all, more or less, when he first came to visit "Brother Alec" at the Priory. It was impossible to live at Kirkdale without being familiar with that tall thin figure, slightly bent, as it moved rapidly from house to house—for the most part amongst the poor—or rode, as if life and death depended on his speed (as, indeed, they often did), along the roads and lanes; but he seldom went out into society, and this was the first occasion that I had taken much notice of him. He was a brown-skinned, handsome fellow, with hair that had been black as a coal ere it grew

early tinged with grey ; his eyes were intelligent and piercing in the intensity of their gaze, but did not rove, as sharp eyes are wont to do ; they moved slowly, almost, it seemed, with difficulty, from one speaker to the other, resting on each as though they were never going to leave him. His voice was gentle, but firm ; he had a quick fleeting smile, when addressed by a person of the opposite sex, but had neither the look nor the manners which are generally associated with the idea of “a lady’s doctor ;” and, indeed, he was thought to eschew that branch of his profession more than was becoming.

On his return from interviewing his patient above-stairs he was invited into the drawing-room, where I happened—it being a pouring wet afternoon—to be holding a skein of worsted for Gertrude. Though my occupation might perhaps have excused my remaining, I rose to retire, but Mrs. Raeburn bade me be seated.

"We are all friends here of poor Mr. Alexander," observed she, with a wave of her hand, "and equally interested in your tidings, Doctor Wilde."

"I am not a physician, madam," was his unexpected reply. "I know it is the custom to call me so at Kirkdale, as it was with Mr. Rombold, but I always think it well with persons of intelligence to explain that much. You may think, perhaps, a physician's diploma necessary for the right understanding of Mr. Raeburn's case?"

"Not at all, not at all, Mr. Wilde. My husband and myself have every confidence in your opinion. Mr. Alexander is his only brother; he has lived with us for some time, and will, I hope, continue to do so; but he is, of course, a great responsibility."

Mrs. Raeburn had adopted this idea from my uncle, and found it very satisfactory. None but he, out of the Priory circle, were aware of Brother Alec's testamentary intentions, which were still supposed to be

favourable to the family interests. Even this calling in of the doctor, would, she knew, redound to her credit, as evincing a disinterested solicitude for her relative, and all her later arrangements had been framed with an eye to that effect.

“I understand your position entirely, Mrs. Raeburn,” answered the doctor, gravely; “and I wish it lay in my power to lighten the burthen of which you speak.”

“You don’t mean to say that my brother-in-law is dying?” demanded Mrs. Raeburn, with such vehemence as might well have seemed to be that passionate appeal against the decree of Fate to which a doctor has often to listen from those to whom a doomed man is dear.

“Nay, I meant to say nothing of the sort, madam! Mr. Raeburn may live for months, perhaps years, though I do not think the latter probable; but his case is very serious, and one for which, unhappily, medical skill can do but little. Do I under-

stand you that I am to speak freely my opinion of his case?"

Mrs. Raeburn moved a pace towards the door, then stopped. "Yes, doctor—you must excuse my still using that title, it is too familiar to me to be dropped—you can speak out before these young people, since their anxiety is as great as mine! It is better for us all to know the worst."

"Then, in my judgment, the worst is that your relative is threatened with softening of the brain. He has apparently had some shock under which his system has broken down. Is that the case?"

Mrs. Raeburn hesitated for an instant, during which the doctor's eyes moved slowly to Gertrude's listening face, now streaked with a sharp pain, and settled there.

"My brother-in-law has had no shock that I am aware of," answered Mrs. Raeburn, with the thoughtful slowness of some conscientious witness, who is sounding the very depths of his recollection. "He has

lived abroad, however, and we know but little of the events of his life. His nature is reticent, as I daresay you discovered?"

As she put this question, she looked up sharply at the doctor; whereupon he slowly withdrew his gaze from Gertrude, and fixed it once more upon her.

"Reticent by nature, is he? I should have thought otherwise."

"Oh! Mrs. Raeburn, I don't think cousin Alec is reticent at all," remonstrated Gertrude. "He was not so, at least, until he began to be ill."

Mrs. Raeburn shrugged her shoulders, which she had a habit of doing, after the French fashion—just as the rhinoceros sometimes takes it into his head, or horn, to amble like a pony—and the gesture did not become her.

"Character is a matter of opinion, Gertrude; but I should certainly describe my brother-in-law as reticent; quiet and docile, at all events, he is to an extreme degree,

doctor; you could see that for yourself?"

"Yes, and I fear he will become more and more quiet, madam; more difficult to rouse. I have left him a prescription, but drugs will avail him little. His improvement will rest with those about him, rather than with me."

"Ah!" cried Mrs. Raeburn, looking round at Gertrude and myself, "you hear that?"

"Yes; endeavours must be made to interest him in things, no matter what, but in such a manner as not to show the endeavour. Above all, his own condition must never be alluded to, though I have reason to believe that he suspects it already. He was always fond of that curious parrot, I suppose?"

"Next to ourselves," said Mrs. Raeburn softly, "I do assure you I believe he loves no living creature so well."

I felt quite thankful that John Raeburn

was not in the room, since that exhibition of sentiment on the part of his mother would certainly have been too much for him.

"I am glad to hear it," said the doctor thoughtfully. "In diseases of this kind the waning mind sometimes attaches itself to objects which would have had but an inferior interest for it if in health; but in this case the predilection seems to have no such significance." Then he took up his hat and gloves. "I shall call again in a few days, Mrs. Raeburn."

"Daily, I hope," returned she, hastily. "It is such a comfort to us—relieves us all from such a sense of responsibility."

"In that case, I will do so, for the present; but I repeat to you that medicine can be of little service."

"But what *can* be of service? Have you any further instructions to leave with us?"

"No, I think not."

Once more his eyes wandered to Ger-

trude. She rose and he shook hands with her and me, then said a few words in a low tone to Mrs. Raeburn, who left the room with him, and presently we heard them in whispered confab in the hall.

"How shocking this is about cousin Alec," said my darling, her soft eyes swimming in tears; "yet it does not surprise me; I thought he was very, very ill."

"He has had trouble enough to make him so, Gerty. Now that is over, perhaps he will improve in health; at all events, let us hope so."

Gertrude shook her head.

"You heard what Mr. Wilde said, that there was softening of the brain?"

"He said he thought so; but he is evidently one of those doctors who think the worst about everybody. It was very wrong of him, in my judgment, to go blurt-ing out his opinion as he did, and putting you in such a state, when, after all, perhaps, he may be wrong."

“Well, for my part, I like a doctor to treat one like a sensible being,” returned Gertrude. “With a patient there may be reasons for concealment, but those who love him ought, I think, to be made aware of his full danger. To hear every day the same smooth sentence, ‘He is much the same,’ without a hint of what is menacing, and then, when the gloss can be put on no longer, ‘There is no hope; he is a dying man,’ is a cruel shock.”

There was a feeling in her tone which told me she was speaking from sad experience; perhaps of the loss of her own parents; and I did not pursue the topic. But Dr. Wilde had not made a favourable impression on me. He had no right, I thought, to make eyes at any young lady as he had done at Gertrude, but especially at her; it was bad taste, and an infringement of copyright besides.

The next day he called again, and, after a week's interval, once more. On the first

occasion I did not see him, but on the last I happened to meet him on the road as he was returning on horseback from the house. He pulled up on meeting me.

“How is Mr. Raeburn?” inquired I.

“There is no change,” said he; “none, at least, that is perceptible.”

“But, if any, it is for the worse?” said I, translating his grave looks. He nodded, fondling his chin in his hand, as men often do when in doubt as to some course of action.

“Are you still of the same opinion,” inquired I, “of the nature of the disease? Do you still think it is softening of the brain?”

“I do.” I was about to go on my way, when he cried, “Stop, I want to have a word with you, Mr. Sheddon;” then, flinging himself off his horse, and hitching the bridle under his arm, he walked on slowly by my side. Something warned me that this man was going to speak to me of Gertrude.

“You will excuse my questioning you ; but you are a friend of the family at the Priory, and also of the particular member of it who is my patient, and I want to understand his position there. Is it comfortable ? Is he content with it ? Of course I ask this in the strictest confidence.”

“Yes,” said I, with quite a sense of relief, notwithstanding the embarrassment this inquiry cost me. “I think Mr. Raeburn is comfortably placed enough. Between ourselves, it has not always been so, but he has nothing to complain of now.”

“Has he any friends—real friends—whom he could visit, even for a little while, with pleasure to himself. What he needs most is change.”

“My uncle Hastings would, I am sure, be charmed to see him. They are very old friends. He is the Rector of Stanbrook, you know.”

“Stanbrook ? Well, that would be a change of scene at least. Yes, that would

do. Mr. Raeburn will take no action in the affair himself; but, perhaps, you could get him an invitation?"

"Easily. There are two spare rooms at the Rectory, beside the one they call mine. He ought to have somebody with him, ought he not?"

The doctor laid his hand upon my arm. "You are a capital fellow," said he, "and have a head upon your shoulders. Yes," mused he, "they shall both go to Stanbrook; then we shall see."

"Both go," inquired I; "what do you mean by 'both?'" I should be very glad to stay there with Mr. Raeburn if I could be of any use; but it could only be for a day or two. I am very busy just now in the office."

"Indeed!" replied the doctor, with a quiet side glance at my face; "it is very pleasant to see a young man so devoted to his duties, and averse to take a holiday!"

The colour rushed into my cheeks, for I

felt this man was making fun of me after his dry serious fashion.

“Well, at all events,” said I, sulkily, “I can’t go to Stanbrook—that is, for long.”

“Just so. Miss Floyd, however, is not in the office, I suppose; nor burthened with legal occupations?”

I felt getting redder than ever. My companion’s tone was very good-humoured, but I resented his remarks exceedingly.

“I do not understand you, Mr. Wilde!”

“Don’t be angry, my dear Mr. Sheddon,” replied he, for the first time smiling outright. “Doctors are non-combatants, you know, so it’s no use calling me out. Let me explain myself. The fact is that my patient is evidently much attached to Miss Floyd. He is never so well—he told me this himself—as in her society; and if she could be induced to accompany him on this visit to your uncle; supposing—as I have reason to do—that her presence would be agreeable to Mrs. Hastings——”

“She would be delighted,” interrupted I enthusiastically. “My aunt has often said, ‘How I wish I could ask Gertrude without that odious woman?’” Here I stopped short, I daresay with a look of considerable embarrassment; it suddenly struck me that I was committing a breach of good manners in thus referring to my hostess.

“Mrs. Raeburn is not a favourite with Mrs. Hastings, I have heard,” said he, coolly. “Well, that is no matter. You can get this invitation, then. You needn’t say I suggested it; but the sooner it comes the better.”

“It shall come this week, doctor; maybe I can do some good by running over to Stanbrook myself.”

“Well, if your legal duties permit of it,” said he. “Perhaps, under the circumstances, you will find them more elastic.”

He nodded with good-humoured significance, mounted his horse, and went off at a hard gallop.

My bad opinion of Mr. Wilde was somehow scattered to the winds. I had not been absolutely jealous of him, but I had thought he ventured to admire Gertrude too demonstratively; whereas now, since he obviously took my tender relation to her for granted, it seemed only his homage to my own good taste. Returning to the Priory in high glee at the prospect of a visit to Stanbrook in company with my charmer, I met John Raeburn at the door.

"I say," said he, in his delicate, off-hand manner, "here's a pretty go. Softening of the brain is catching, it seems, and we are all to be in for it. But there, you have just met the doctor, I suppose?"

"Yes; but he told me nothing new. What has happened?"

"Well, Gerty is not well, it seems."

"Gerty?"

"Yes, you call her 'Gerty,' don't you? though it used to be 'Gertrude' with you, and even 'Miss Floyd!'"

At any other time this bad taste of John's—considering the subject on which he exhibited it—would have annoyed me excessively ; but, as it was, I could only think of his bad news. I pushed past him into the drawing-room, where I found Gertrude alone, engaged in some ordinary avocation.

“What is this I hear about you, Gerty?”

“About me?” answered she, smiling.

“Yes. Surely John would never have played such a cruel trick on me as to say you were ill if you were not?”

“Ill, Harry? No, I'm not ill ; but it is true that Mr. Wilde did not think me looking well. I have not been quite well lately ; and he has prescribed for me, that's all.”

“That's all ! But that may be a great deal, Gerty. And what has he prescribed ? Not nasty medicines that make one shudder to look at, and sick to smell, I hope ?”

“Well, he has prescribed one thing which I don't relish, Harry, and don't mean to take—which is, change of air. I have always

been quite well at the Priory, so why should I leave it—and you, Harry?” she added, softly.

“My dear, you must do what the doctor tells you, and be a good girl,” said I, with a didactic air.

I would not tell her that we were going to take a change of air together, until I was quite sure that I could bring about the arrangement; but I had already planned it in my mind.

CHAPTER V.

A CHANGE OF QUARTERS.

THERE was no difficulty in getting an invitation for "Brother Alec" and Gertrude from the Rectory. My uncle was hospitality itself; nor was my aunt behindhand in that respect, except that she was more fastidious as to the guests. She had often expressed a wish to invite Miss Floyd, but had been deterred from so doing lest one of her "belongings"—or, in other words, Mrs. Raeburn—should volunteer to accompany her, and also from delicacy with respect to myself; for, though Mrs. Hastings was a match-maker to the core, she would run no risk of its being said that she had inveigled an

heiress under her roof for the benefit of her nephew. But now that medical advice had declared itself on the side of inclination, my aunt had no further scruples ; if her Harry should wish to pay a visit to his own home while Miss Floyd chanced to be staying there, it was surely not to be expected that he should be forbidden the house.

Brother Alec was greatly pleased at the communication of his old friend, couched, as it was, in the warmest terms, and with only just so much reference to his indisposition as made it the kindlier ; but he had some qualms about accepting the offer. "I am but a wretched creature, you see, Sheddon ; a mere wet blanket. I am afraid I shall very literally put you all out."

But I saw he was eager to go, notwithstanding these protestations, and I combated them as strenuously as I could.

"Well, I am but a bag of bones," said he at last. "Perhaps the presence of such a skeleton at your uncle's board may be con-

sidered an acquisition. The Egyptians liked it, you know, eh? There is only one thing, however, that troubles me."

"What's that, sir? I am sure it need not do so."

"Suppose I was to die in the house?" suggested the old man. "Your aunt wouldn't like that, I'm sure?"

Brother Alec's humour, it must be confessed, had grown dreadfully grim, and his appearance was much calculated to enhance it. He had not grown his beard again, and the hairless face looked very worn and lined, while his clothes hung about his lean limbs as though they had been made for another man. His speech, too, once so quick and vigorous, was slow and hesitating; only his eyes retained their fire. To me, who had heard the doctor's verdict, his words had a most painful significance. It was settled, however, that Brother Alec was to go to Stanbrook; but, with respect to Gertrude, Mrs. Raeburn, as I had expected, was strong

in opposition. The dear girl herself had said only the other day that she did not wish for change; and to have, as it were, the care of an invalid thus thrust upon her—and the responsibilities too—no; Mrs. Hastings meant it kindly, no doubt, but such an arrangement was not desirable. Gertrude, of course, could hardly press the matter on her own account. She was certainly not quite well, as I could see for myself now that the idea had been put into my head. Young gentlemen are not great observers of ill-health, even in the objects of their affections, unless the change is strongly marked; and Gertrude was by no means one to make a fuss about herself, nor, in any case, would she have confided to me—like the young lady in “*Tremaine*,” who loses her extra-superfine lover through telling him “she had taken medicine”—the fact of her indisposition. Brother Alec, indeed, whose will was now law in the house, could have insisted upon her accompanying him,

but Mrs. Raeburn so successfully worked with him her "responsibility" argument, pointing out what a charge he must needs be to his cousin, and especially if she was really in ill-health, that he felt it an act of selfishness to urge the matter.

Gertrude's acceptance of the invitation seemed, in fact, out of the question, when Mr. Wilde, who happened to make a professional call that morning at the Priory, changed the aspect of affairs by his unhesitating fiat.

"The best receipt I can suggest to Miss Floyd," said he, "is to accompany her cousin to Stanbrook. I don't affirm that she needs change more than he does, but it is my firm conviction that it will do her more good."

Mrs. Raeburn stood to her guns, and when driven from them, disputed every inch of ground, from the heights of "undesirability," down to the depths of insufficiency of wardrobe. The dear girl had positively nothing to take with her ;

nothing, on so very short a notice, to put on. She fought him in the drawing-room, and when he came down from his upstairs patient, she even made a running fight of it in the hall. One shot from the doctor I overheard myself; and it took effect on me, and, embedding itself deeply in my memory, was fated to give me trouble long afterwards.

“You talk of responsibility, madam! Pray remember, if my advice is disregarded in this case, that the event, whatever it be, will lie at your door.”

This observation, delivered in the gravest tone, and without a trace of irritation, seemed to have settled the matter, for Mrs. Raeburn presently announced to Gertrude that, “after considering all the pros and cons,” she thought it better that she should try the Stanbrook air.

So Brother Alec and she took their departure thither accordingly. I had often been back at the Rectory since my legal

apprenticeship to Mark Raeburn, but not for any lengthened stay; I was genuinely attached to my relatives, yet always more than glad when the day came to return to Kirkdale. It was but natural, the best of uncles and aunts—not to say of parents—lose their attraction when the loadstone of love draws us elsewhere. But Stanbrook was my home, and I had never missed Gertrude's presence there as I was now doomed to do at the Priory, of whose gloom she was the solitary light; in her absence life seemed to be emptied of all its joys. I had known that I loved her, but I knew not how much till we parted, and I felt the dull weight of her absence at my heart. Then I understood, too, for the first time, what virtue there lies in love, not only to charm, but to mitigate what is not charming about us. With Gertrude near me, everything had been tolerable; her large charity, too, had taught me to see the embers of what was good still alive in the

attorney's nature, and the good-humour and sprightliness in that of John. But now I felt left alone, with a sot and a buffoon.

For, as to Mrs. Raeburn, the withdrawal of her two guests afforded an opportunity for the "setting to rights" of the establishment that was not to be missed, and she absented herself a good deal from our society, and left us three men together. The dinners were more "scrappy" than ever, for it was also a glorious chance for economising, and everybody but the bull-dog—whose cannibalistic eye showed he was not to be trifled with—was placed upon short commons. A sense of isolation had, as I have said, of late been growing upon me, with respect to the Raeburn family, though hitherto I had attributed a certain coldness and reserve in their manner towards me to the influence of the mistress of the house; but even now that she had withdrawn herself from us, and left her son and husband

free to behave as they pleased, I saw that they had assumed a different attitude towards me from that they had used of old. The attorney's talk was constrained, and his manner punctilious, and though the latter adjective could scarcely be applied to the irrepressible John, he no more regaled me with the family scandals: perhaps he felt that he had already told enough.

This state of things was not one that a high-spirited youth, with money in his pocket, was likely to endure very patiently. If my legal studies engaged my attention, they had not yet succeeded in attracting my interest, and I had not a soul I cared to speak to; for Mr. Wilde, for whom I now felt a liking far stronger than the prejudice I had at first entertained against him, did not of course now visit the Priory, but transferred his professional calls to Stanbrook.

After a week of this unpleasant life, I boldly announced at breakfast one Saturday morning my intention of going over to my

uncle's house that day and staying till Monday.

"Then," said I, with a cheerful carelessness that I was far from feeling, for I expected strenuous opposition, "I shall be able to bring you a personal report of the invalids, which is always more satisfactory than a mere bulletin."

When I look back on the past, it strikes me that I must have been a singularly audacious young person to make that speech, for it could not have required Mrs. Raeburn's suspicious keenness to read through so transparent an excuse like glass.

To my great relief, however, she only observed, "Your time is your own, Mr. Sheddon, and if you choose to waste your uncle's money by neglecting your studies, that is his affair, not ours."

"Just so," said I, coolly; nobody could say that I ever knocked under to that woman. "If you have anything to send, I shall be glad to take it."

The attorney uttered not a word, but his disfigured face grew redder and more unwholesome to the view. He knew my motive for going to Stanbrook, and that I had disregarded his warning on my first arrival to the uttermost; he knew also that I had long ago detected its falsehood. Often and often have I considered why he told me that monstrous yet sure-to-be discovered lie. It was not at his wife's suggestion, or even with her consent, I am very certain. My impression is, it arose from one of those ill-timed resolves to assert himself that sometimes take possession of a weak and vacillating man. It was his object—and a vital one, as I afterwards discovered—to prevent any engagement taking place between myself and Gertrude, and it suddenly occurred to him to stop it by a *coup de main*. The effect had been most disastrous, not only as respected his design, but in relation to myself; for it had deprived him, and he saw it, of all respect in my eyes. I should have

had less contempt for him as a husband, and more pity for him as regarded his brother, but for that piece of coarse duplicity. However, I thought but little of him and his—for little I guessed how they were fated to affect me and mine!—when I found myself in the yellow fly that morning bound for Stanbrook. It was midsummer, and the heart of June beat in unison with my own; its sunshine was reflected in my breast. I thought no more of winter than the bird upon the bough, and was whistling as merrily, when old Bob, the driver, who had taken me many a time to school, and knew me as well as though he had been my uncle's private servant, turned suddenly round with, "Here's the doctor, Master Harry!" It was Mr. Wilde, coming along the road as usual at a hand gallop, from the direction of the Rectory. He pulled up when he recognised me, and the quick smile, that always seemed to leave his features more thoughtful than before, flitted across his face.

“So you are going to try change of air at Stanbrook, are you?” said he, significantly. “I rather expected you would feel it necessary.”

I blushed, because Bob was present, though his whole intelligence, I am persuaded, was at that moment concentrated upon a fly on the horse's ear, but answered carelessly, “Well, I certainly found the Priory rather dull with your two patients away. How are they?”

“Mr. Raeburn is much the same; if anything, there is an improvement. He certainly takes more notice of things and is more cheerful.”

“And Gertrude?”

“Well, Miss Floyd is better; yes, decidedly better.”

There was a strange incongruity with the satisfactory nature of his news in the gravity of his air and tone, which did not escape me.

“Why, you say so as if you were sorry

for it, Mr. Wilde!" said I, laughing. "My belief is that you regret there is no further excuse for your personal attendance on the young lady."

"And a certain man drew a bow at a venture and smote the king between the joints of his harness," returned the doctor gravely. "It is quite true that I shall make no more morning calls at Stanbrook, since there is no more necessity for them. However, don't be jealous, Harry," said he smiling, and gathering up his reins; "your coming will be a very pleasant surprise to somebody, I don't doubt!"

He was away in a moment, else I would have wished to have questioned him more closely. There was certainly something in Gertrude's case which did not give him complete satisfaction, though he pronounced her better. Perhaps he had expected her to get worse, and she had disappointed the prognostications of science.

Here came into sight Grey Gable; the

stately fell, at whose green foot lay my uncle's house, and which I had climbed a hundred times. It seemed to me like some kindly giant keeping watch and ward over my princess. I would persuade her to mount with me its craggy heights, that she might feast her eyes upon the glorious scene that it commanded, and which had so often delighted mine. Then the lake in its turn came into view, showing its blue through the green trees, as no artist would have dared to paint it; what fairy hours would we pass together upon its waveless depths, or hidden from the heat of noon in some shadowy bay! From which reflections it may be gathered that my resolution to return to Kirkdale on the ensuing Monday was not quite fixed; and, indeed, I had not the faintest intention of doing so. How my heart beat as we neared the house, and when, from the low-sunk road, I saw those two upon the terraced walk—a feeble figure, with his hand upon a young girl's shoulder

—I leaped from the carriage like an uncarted deer, and ran up the garden-steps and across the lawn to greet them. I think it was “a pleasant surprise to somebody,” as Mr. Wilde had said.

The old man struck me as visibly thinner, paler, and more broken. The doctor had seen him several times, it must be remembered, and I not once during the last ten days. His manner to me was even kinder than usual—tender, it struck me, after the fashion of those who feel they are not long for this world, and whose every meeting with their friends may be their last. But Gertrude, with her love-lit eyes and tell-tale blush, looked the very picture of health as well as of happiness.

My aunt Hastings agreed with me in this, but ascribed it to Stanbrook air.

“When Gertrude came here she was looking far from well, Harry. You ought to have seen that for yourself; but you are like your uncle—one must run a pin into

you to draw your attention to any matter, though it be under your nose. The mountain air is setting her up, however, and I shall keep her here as long as that old witch, her kinswoman, will permit it. It is very kind of you, Harry," she went on demurely, "to visit your poor aunt and uncle in this unexpected way. I never knew you to do it before without the *avant-courier* of a letter." Then suddenly, with a flash of her rings, "Oh, you sly, bad boy, ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

My aunt, in short, was in high good-humour, and, I could see, was delighted with Gertrude, who made herself useful to her in a thousand ways, and it seemed to my boyish heart that all was going well with me and mine !

CHAPTER VI.

THE RECTORY AND THE PARISH.

IN my passion for Gertrude—whose charms, both of body and mind, might well indeed have excused such infatuation in a much wiser man—life at the Priory, at which she was, had almost effaced the recollection of life at the Rectory, where she was not; but now that she had come to Stanbrook, all that had made that fair home dear to me before my acquaintance with her became doubly attractive. I began existence afresh there under such bright auspices as threw even the old careless happiness of boyhood into the shade. In the atmosphere of such a love as mine, all objects take the love-

tint ; and even Uncle Ralph, for whom I had always felt the most genuine affection, shone in my eyes the brighter for it ; while Aunt Eleanor became positively etherealised. I forgot that she was dictatorial and selfish, and only felt that she was kind. Even her favourite "Nelly," now grown more invalidish and exacting than ever, I did not wish absolutely dead, but only removed to some sphere of existence where she would be more generally appreciated than at Stanbrook. How everybody, except her mistress and Gertrude (who hated no being that had ever so little of the breath of life), detested that fat dog ! Its colour, according to my aunt, was auburn, but to less loving eyes it had red hair, very soft and silken, what there was of it, but the supply was inadequate ; there were isolated patches of baldness, to which every balsam known to science had been applied in vain. Physicians had been consulted about these "spots in the sun," as my uncle called them, and shaken their wise heads over

them; they could be no more changed than those of the leopard. Hairdressers had exhausted their art in the supply of washes and decoctions, but nothing had come of it except their bills. The only man who had ever done Nelly good was, curiously enough, the one person in the parish against whom my aunt entertained a relentless enmity. She was not like some clergymen's wives—impatient with Dissenters, or (especially) with Church people who did not go to church; on the contrary, she sympathised with these latter persons, and would abstain from going to church herself sometimes, when she was not pleased with my uncle, upon the ground that she could not bear to hear people preach what they did not practise. The innuendo always failed in its intention of putting the rector out of humour. He had not a spark of pulpit vanity. "Heaven help me, my dear Eleanor," he was wont to say, "if my practice is not better than my preaching!" But against "that man Robston," who kept

the little butcher's shop in Stanbrook village, Aunt Eleanor set her face edgeways, as the executioner before the days of Jack Ketch used to carry his axe. She would send into Kirkdale whenever it was possible, and deal with anyone rather than with him, and all because he had done dear Nelly a great deal of good. Robston had chanced to come on his rounds one day when the interesting invalid had seemed to be at her last gasp, and had expressed an opinion that he could cure her. My aunt was very incredulous upon the matter, but nevertheless had given the thing a trial, just as, when orthodox science fails to give relief to some tender sufferer, her relatives will try the quacks.

"Are you really serious, Robston?" inquired my aunt, putting her lace-bordered handkerchief to her eyes, as she regarded her panting favourite. "Do you indeed think that she may yet be spared to me?"

"I haven't a doubt about it, marm," was the confident reply.

“But what is it, Robston, that is the matter with her? The sweet creature is such an immense size, and yet will eat nothing. Do you think it can be dropsy?”

“Well, no, marm; I don’t think it’s exactly dropsy.”

“But have you heard her breathe?” inquired my aunt.

This was a wholly unnecessary question, for it was impossible to be within the Rectory grounds and not to hear her. She was not only asthmatical, but stertorous; she did not walk, but waddled. “Every day, Robston, it seems to me that her poor dear legs get farther and farther apart from one another.”

“Well, she be fat, that’s sartin; and her coat ain’t altogether what it should be; but yet, I think, if I took her home for a week or so, I could do her a power of good.”

“What! take her away from me for a whole week, and to that nasty shop of yours! Why, suppose anything was to happen to

her in my absence, I should never forgive myself !”

However, the butcher was firm as to having the patient at his own house, if a cure was to be effected, and in the end it was so arranged. The parting between mistress and dog was most affecting, and many an injunction as to board and lodging was laid upon Mr. Robston ere he departed with his precious charge. At home the spoilt creature had two beds, so as to be able to change from one to the other, when it felt too hot ; and its linen, of which it had a good stock, was marked with an N, embroidered by my aunt herself, as though it had belonged to the family at Chislehurst.

“What she likes, Robston, best of all, if anything can tempt her,” were her mistress’s last words, spoken in a voice which trembled with emotion, “is a nice little sweet-bread, well browned !”

It was a great comfort to my aunt, during the enforced separation that ensued, that

Nelly had gone to a roof under which, though humble, sweet-breads, from the nature of Mr. Robston's profession, would always be procurable.

In ten days Nelly was given back to her mistress's arms, quite another dog. She could breathe, if not without difficulty, still without that painful resemblance to an engine when tugging a goods-train up an incline; her bulk was perceptibly decreased; and upon a mutton-chop being placed before her, she would hardly wait for her napkin to be tied on, so impatient had her appetite rendered her; and she devoured it to the bone. So delighted was my aunt with this transformation, that I verily believe she would have given Robston a lock of Nelly's hair — the most precious present which her imagination could have suggested — if the crop had permitted of such generosity; but, as it was, she gave him a ten-pound note, which perhaps his rugged nature valued as highly.

The term "our preserver," I have heard more than once applied to Robston as he drove his light cart into the back yard, and my aunt had certainly a higher opinion of his talents than of my own, though I was her nephew, and my poetic powers were then at their zenith. The fall of Robston could only be compared in the vastness and completion of its catastrophe to that of Wolsey (who, by-the-by, was also a butcher).

Not content with the magical improvement in her darling's health, my aunt was above measure solicitous to know how it had been effected, and though for some time Robston declined to reveal the secret, it was at length elicited by her importunity.

"Well, marm, the fact is, the treatment, as you are pleased to call it, was the simplest in the world, and you can use it yourself whenever the dog ails again. It was nothing more than liver."

"I have not a doubt of that, my dear

Mr. Robston. Sir Toby Ruffles told me as much as that. But what is more difficult to cure than liver?"

"Well, I don't know about that, marm, for I never tried, though my missus cures bacon wonderful. But what I did with that dog was this: she came to me, as you know, like to burst with fat and good living; and the first evening I gives her a bit of good wholesome liver from off our own supper-table, at which she turns up her little nose."

"Poor dear!" ejaculated my aunt; "she detests all those vulgar dishes."

"Ah, but you wait a bit," continued Mr. Robston, whose growing interest in his own narrative prevented his perception of its effect upon his listener. "I puts that piece of liver by careful, and offers it to her again the next night, taking precious good care as she had nothing else between whiles; and she turns up her little nose again."

“Pretty darling, what must she have suffered!” murmured my aunt.

“Well, marm, I will say for that ’ere dog of yours, as she’s a good plucked ’un; she didn’t take kind to that bit of liver for four days, but allers turned up her little nose at it (and, indeed, it was pretty high and strong by that time, by reason of the hot weather); but on the fifth day my lady swallows it all at a mouthful. Then says I, ‘Miss Nelly, you are on the road to mend!’”

“‘On the road to mend!’” repeated my aunt, as though she could not believe her ears.

“And whenever that ’ere dog goes wrong again,” continued Mr. Robston, “as she will do, as to fat and breathing, if you feed her up so, you’ll find that same treatment of mine—though I say it, who shouldn’t say it—a sovereign remedy.”

My aunt said nothing, for speech failed her. She dismissed the physician with a

wave of her hand; but, from that moment, Mr. Robston's doom as purveyor to the Rectory was sealed. In vain my uncle interceded for him, and pointed out that the treatment had been a recognised one from the days of Dog Pompey, and, above all, to its triumphant success.

"Never let me hear that wretch's name mentioned again!" cried she. "A man who could give my sweet Nelly a piece of liver five days old!"

If Gertrude herself had been treated in that way, my aunt could scarcely have expressed more horror. Unfortunately, however, the lesson was one wholly thrown away upon her; and the dog, stuffed scarcely less with sweet-breads than of old, lived on, a burthen to itself and to the footman who had to carry it. As the fellow-commoners, in old days at Trinity, were the only undergraduates permitted to cross the college grass-plots, so this creature was the only one, except the players, who was free of

the Rectory croquet-ground — a lawn of marvellous smoothness, cut off from the general garden by tight lines of string. To see my uncle and aunt disporting themselves “within the ropes,” as John Rae-burn called it, as though the place had been a prize-ring, was like watching a minuet, so slow and stately were their movements, and so rapt in their occupation were these two worthy souls. It was the only taste they had in common—the hobby-horse that they rode together, or, rather the one behind the other, for my uncle was almost always a hoop or two in the rear. Should any male visitor venture to set foot upon the sacred spot, “Hullo, no heel-taps,” the rector would observe, and point rebukefully to the indentations made on the tender grass by the intruders; and, as for the players, there were slippers provided for them to be worn over their boots, as in a powder manufactory. Of course I had observed these little traits in the characters of my relatives for myself,

but without appreciating them as I was now taught to do by Dr. Wilde, who, in spite of his expressed opinion that he could be of little service to the invalid, now became a frequent visitor at the Rectory. The society of my uncle and aunt was very attractive to him, and the liking was more than reciprocated on their part; although, on the question of Nelly's health, Mrs. Hastings complained that Dr. Wilde was too off-hand in giving his professional advice, which was in the main, indeed, that of Dr. Robston (super-seded). She would not easily have forgiven anyone else for nicknaming the Rectory "Hornet Hall," a title that he certainly did not bestow upon it without reason. It was much haunted by those formidable insects, and though I don't remember that they ever stung anybody, their presence produced great consternation among strangers.

"My good sir," (or "lady," as the case might be) my uncle was wont to say, when a guest shrank aghast from these intruders,

or made onslaughts on them with his dinner-napkin, "you don't understand hornets—they must be led, and not driven;" and then, by means of a dish of preserves or other sweet stuff, he would entice the winged visitor to "settle," and then quietly put him outside the window, dish and all, to feast at leisure. "Another way," as the cookery-books phrase it, with these pests of the Rectory, was adopted by Nelly, and was even more efficacious. She would stand perfectly still, and even forbear to pant, while a hornet circled round her as if about to settle on one of those bare unprotected spots to which I have alluded—a contingency to which she was, without doubt, fully alive; and then, all of a sudden, there would be a short, sharp snap, and the hornet would disappear. In those autumn days Nelly may have been almost said to live on sweetbreads and hornets.

Once upon the old Rectory ground, I feel tempted to tell how pleasant a place it

was, and to delay for a little space the narration of the history of "Brother Alec," and even of my own affairs, soon doomed, alas! to take a more sombre hue; to sport, as it were, in the sunshine, before entering into that region of mystery and gloom which truth will presently compel me to traverse. Let me try to recall awhile that happy time when love dwelt under the old roof in the fair guise of Gertrude; when host and hostess were at their best and worthiest; and when friendship, in the shape of Dr. Wilde, helped to knit us all together in its common bond.

It has often struck me, when reading after-dinner arguments in town upon that much-debated question of the Agricultural Labourer, how very little the most intelligent of townsfolk know about him and his.

They may go into the country for the summer months, or spend a few weeks there in the winter among dogs, and guns, and keepers; and they may be acquainted with all that books can teach them concerning

the wages, and way of living, of those they are pleased to designate "clod-hoppers," even to those mystic harvest gains which are supposed by the sanguine to make up for all deficiencies through the rest of the year; and yet, of the actual life of the labourer, and of his employer—the farmer—these good gentlemen are in reality as ignorant as of the domestic affairs of King Coffee.

I have sometimes wished, of late, that even some of those Special Correspondents, who have honoured poor Hodge and his master with their presence and attention, could have sat over the walnuts and the wine at Stanbrook Rectory, and listened to my uncle's talk about such matters, for he understood them thoroughly, and had no prejudices against either side, but only sympathy for both.

Dr. Wilde, too, was country-bred, and the characteristic stories that they narrated to one another respecting the two classes—with which I also was personally, though

but superficially acquainted (for a boy's observation goes but skin deep)—live in my memory still. They were for the most part humorous, though the humour was often tinged with tender pathos, and the possession of the former faculty was, I am certain, of the greatest practical value to rector and doctor, not only to themselves, but to those with whom they had to deal. Sometimes Aunt Eleanor would linger at the dessert-table and give her contribution to the stock of parish ana; and even the new-comer, Gertrude, had now and again an anecdote to tell which would make more genuine mirth than the most neatly-turned town epigram. She delighted in being my aunt's almoner (not omitting, however, to be her own as well) among the poor folks, to whose simple hearts her gentleness and beauty soon won their way; and I well remember the first expression of gratitude which her good deeds procured for her. She had been attending the sick-bed of one ancient dame for many days,

and, on leaving the cottage one afternoon, was thus addressed: "I never forget, Miss Gertrude, when I say my prayers at night, to remember you, and to pray Heaven to do the like."

"Indeed," said Gertrude (I have no doubt with much embarrassment), "you are very kind to think of me at such a time."

"Don't mention it, miss," was the unexpected rejoinder; "it's no sort of trouble to put your name in when one is about it."

What worries the sentimentalists and destroys much of their "interest" in the agricultural poor, is, indeed, the total want of "gush" in the objects of their well-meant attentions. The poor in towns being for the most part cleverer, can imitate to some degree the enthusiasm which they know is required of them, especially as regards religious subjects. I have even known poor folks—wives of mechanics out of work, and such like—to adapt themselves to

different species of charity-monger (for I cannot give them a higher name), and be High Church or Low Church in the form of their acknowledgments, as the occasion demanded; but such efforts are beyond the power of our village poor. Their sorrows are not, perhaps, more heavy to bear, but they are more monopolising; face to face with their material miseries the poor souls cannot look beyond them, except so far as nature teaches them to do. The panaceas, which their prosperous patrons (and I am now chiefly speaking of lady "visitors") would recommend them, are not only inefficacious, but the prescriptions—the mere formulæ—are unknown to them. They do not understand that these spiritual physicians require the cure to be worked in their own way, and in no other, just as the doctors resent the interference of any "unqualified practitioner;" and thus it is that many well-meaning and charitable persons complain that those whom they would benefit

(and patronise) are “impracticable,” “without feeling,” &c. &c.

Aunt Eleanor, who was quite a Lady Bountiful in Stanbrook in her way, though her kindnesses were for the most part done by deputy, used to talk, with respect to this matter, of her disillusions. A labouring man got caught in some agricultural machinery on a neighbouring farm, and lay for many weeks between life and death. He had been a very dissipated fellow, and when at last he “turned the corner” and seemed to be getting well, my aunt went to say “a word in season” to him. After the interview she addressed his wife, expecting, doubtless, to find her all thankfulness at his recovery.

“I do hope, Mrs. Hodge, that when your husband gets well he will lead quite another sort of life; and, in the meantime, how grateful you ought to feel that he is still spared to you.”

“Well, yes, ma’am, he’s been a pous

man, no doubt," was the reply ("pous" being our village name for a good-for-naught); "but he may bide a little longer if he has a mind."

The heart-weariness of this sad speech was unintelligible to the rector's wife, nor had she the humour to appreciate it from a less sombre point of view. The "literalness" of the poor—in preaching to whom the clergy will nevertheless persist in using old-world metaphors—was also a stumbling-block with her. She called our parish stupid, because, when her husband had once spoken in the pulpit of there being "a leaven" of good people everywhere, inclusive of Stanbrook itself, a controversy arose in the village as to who the eleven were to whom he had alluded, and whether the sexton (who was not invariably sober) "was put down in t' parson's list," or left out of it.

It is, unfortunately, difficult to reproduce the mode of pronunciation in vogue at

Stanbrook, but my uncle was a perfect master of it, and fell into it quite naturally whenever he was in conversation with a parishioner — a grammatical condescension that, among the high-flying clergy of to-day, is avoided as a mistake. I shall never forget his imitation of the apology of the mother of one of his Sunday-school scholars: “I can niver meak that boy love his larning, sir, although I beatts him wi’ a jack chain.”

For a while after my uncle’s marriage he had been induced by Aunt Eleanor to keep a curate, to whom objection was made by the principal farmer of the place, upon a very characteristic ground indeed. The rector observed the dislike, and asked this man of many acres the cause of it.

“Well, sir,” said he, “I have nothing to say against the young gentleman; but I’ve been inquiring, and inquiring, and inquiring, and I can’t find out as he owns any property. Now I don’t, for my part, like

being told of my sins by a man as hasn't got any property."

If the poor labourer was lavish of his pence, as men are too apt to be whose gains are so exceedingly small as to seem not worth saving, the farmers took great care of theirs, and set their minds much on the main chance. One small proprietor in Stanbrook had married no less than three times, and on each occasion had chosen a middle-aged servant, who had saved a bit of money while in service.

"Why, John," said my uncle, when this prudent bridegroom came to him for the fourth time to have his banns put up, "are you going to be married again? Why you must be getting quite rich, if what people say is true, that you get money with all your wives!"

"Well, no, sir," answered this Bluebeard, entirely unabashed, "folks is quite mistaken, for, what with bringing on 'em in" (viz., the expenses of the wedding) "and carryin' 'em

out " (expenses of the funeral), "I makes uncommon little by 'em."

I remember that Dr. Wilde's experience was curiously corroborative of my uncle's in this respect. His early life had been passed at Hornton, a parish not far from Kirkdale (which was probably the reason of his selecting that place for his present residence) of which his father was village doctor, and a very poor calling it was. The labourers could not pay, and the farmers would not, unless they were positively obliged. One of the latter, who was a hard drinker, had been thrown from his horse and much injured, and needed a visit from the doctor every day, though he lived at a considerable distance. One morning, however, Dr. Wilde met his patient, though obviously unfitted to be out of doors, a few yards upon the road.

"Come, doctor," said he, "you must not set this down as a visit."

"Indeed I shall, sir," answered the sur-

geon, indignantly, "since I have ridden some miles solely on your account. If you don't intend to pay me for this, you shall pay me for nothing. I shall tear up my memoranda of your account altogether," and he produced his note-book. "Come, would you have me make a clean slate of the whole bill?"

The farmer nodded delighted acquiescence, and the doctor tore up his account. "And now Mr. Hodge, I don't want to quarrel with you," continued the surgeon; "here is the 'Hare and Hounds;' would you like to step in and take something at my expense?"

He did not certainly expect the offer to be accepted, but he wished to see how far his patient was prepared to go in the way of "all take."

"Well, thank ye kindly, doctor," was the quiet reply. "I don't care if I do take a glass of port."

It is fair to add, however, that Hornton

was a very rough and uncivilised district, so exposed to the fury of the elements, that, to use a local metaphor, it took two men to shut a farmyard gate in winter. It had also a vast tract of land, half moor, half forest, called Baydon, that was avoided by the superstitious after dark, and which was the scene of, perhaps, the best story in all Dr. Wilde's budget. His father had just come to Hornton, and as yet had had not a single paying patient, when he was disturbed one winter's night by a ring at his bell. On looking out of window, he perceived a farm labourer of middle age, who besought him with great earnestness to come at once and visit a sick woman in Baydon, the wife of a farmer, in whose employment he represented himself to be. It was a miserable wet night, but since there was some prospect of a fee in this case, Mr. Wilde cheerfully attired himself, and with the messenger's assistance saddled his horse.

"I don't know the road to Baydon, my

man, so I must get you to step out as fast as you can."

"Aye, aye," said the man, "I will keep pace with you well enough."

And off they started in the storm and darkness. After they had proceeded a couple of miles, and had passed through Baydon, the man on foot suddenly stopped at a large tree, and made this observation :

"Why, surely, this 'ere tree be the Gospel Oak !"

"Well, you ought to know your own parish better than I, my man," returned the doctor, "but, as a matter of fact, it is so. I remember it having been pointed out to me by the squire."

"Ah, then I don't want you no longer," was his companion's very unexpected reply.

"But I want you," returned the other. "How am I to find the road to my patient?"

"Well, to tell 'ee the truth, sir, there ain't nobody ill at all, as I knows on; but

the fact is, it is so precious 'unkid' (eerie) coming through Baydon Wood at night, that I made bold to ask you to be my companion !”

With which words the man vanished, leaving the doctor to go back alone.

It was with anecdotes such as these, all culled from the life around them, that our little party at Stanbrook was wont to make the after-dinner time pass cheerily ; and not even Uncle Alec himself could refuse them the tribute of a smile. On the other hand, the items of village news were sometimes pathetic enough. There was one story that haunts me to this day : how Gertrude had gone to see a poor woman in an advanced stage of consumption, who was sitting up in bed, making the scanty mourning attire her own children were to wear for her after her decease ; an occupation absolutely impossible, I should imagine, to a woman whose position in life had permitted to her the luxury of entertaining

even the natural, and much less the sentimental, emotions.

I had lived among these people, as I have already said, from my youth up, but it was only now that I had begun to think seriously about them, and, through the examples their sad case afforded, to recognise the hardships and sorrows that are the heritage of the immense majority of mankind. My love for Gertrude did not, as in most cases, render me selfish, but, thanks to her, opened my heart to those for whom nature had long ago flung wide her own.

CHAPTER VII.

A SHIPWRECK.

UP to the time of my arrival at the Rectory, Gertrude had never expressed a wish to stray beyond the house and grounds into the beautiful landscape they commanded, and, knowing Mrs. Hastings's objection to locomotion, she had even declined her invitation to do so; but I was not to be balked of the pleasure I had promised myself of introducing her to the fair scenes which had once, in default of a living subject, inspired my youthful muse. On that very Monday, when I was to have returned to my legal bondage, for example, we spent the live-long autumn day together on Gray Gable. I led her

through the hazel copse, all in shade, where hidden brooks scattered their green coolness, and made a murmur which the ring-doves echoed overhead; I led her through the pastures full of kine, and, standing on the high-built, loose-stone walls, I took her dainty hand in mine, and could not choose but squeeze it as I helped her to ascend them. Then, down upon the other side, I waited with spread arms while she made up her mind to risk the fall, and, risking, jumped—oh joy!—within their circuit. I led her dry-shod across the trembling peat-bog, threading the mazes of the sluggish stream, its presence shown by fluffy cotton plant and pure forget-me-nots. I led her o'er the purpling heather, where the grouse whirred up beneath her foot so suddenly that it brought the flush into her cheek, and whence, for many a mile, stretched lake and fell; but I would not let her turn her shapely head to view them.

“Wait! wait!” said I, and led her to

the summit of the fell, where the mountain air was wild to kiss her, and all the mountain world lay peak on peak beneath us, turquoise-set with lake and tarn, and at the verge of all the glimmering sea !

“Now look !” cried I ; “now look !” Gertrude had a soul that could appreciate such a scene, and all my poet’s fondness for that noble spectacle was doubled at the sight of her enjoyment.

Charming as were our mountain rambles, I think our excursions on the lake were even more to our taste. We had but one old flat-bottomed boat at Stanbrook—a punt with oars—as safe as the Ark, and which drew but very little water ; and in this we visited every creek and cove in search of subjects for Gerty’s sketch-book, or to pluck lilies wherewith to set forth our modest dinner-table at home.

Gerty had a taste for table decoration, with which she easily inoculated my aunt, and our meals were served in a very bower.

But the chief of all our lake amusements was what we were wont to term "explorations." There were numberless little brooks that ran into Stanbrook Mere, and one or two Liliputian rivers, their embouchures mostly hidden by rushes, and whose very existence was probably undreamed of by the aborigines. It was our delight to make acquaintance with the windings of these unknown streams, and to discover, *à la* Livingstone, their sources. When we had once pushed through the feathery barrier that fringed their mouths and towered far above us, we found ourselves in a little world of our own, concealed alike from lake and land. The high banks hid our low-lying craft, and greatly astonished were the cattle in the pastures to see two human heads pass noiselessly through the midst of them. None of our own race did we ever meet with, but, doubtless, from that circumstance the number of our other fellow-creatures seemed infinite. The rabbit "fondled

his own foolish face" close beside us, as we took our noiseless way; the hare squatted unconcerned, or hopped at leisure from field to wood; the squirrel hung upon the boughs beneath which we pushed, and stared at us with wondering eyes; the rat splashed from his home at our approach, then slid without sound beneath us. The water-world was even more thickly populated than the land. The air was alive with gorgeous dragon flies, which, "swift and free, like golden boats on a sunny sea," flashed incessantly about us, or, settling on rush and flower, tipped them with fairy flame. The stream was literally paved with lilies, which, with the trees that arched our way, made navigation slow, but, ah! not tedious. Our whole progress was a poem. We explored as far as the boat would go, perhaps for a mile or more, sometimes arriving at a farmhouse which never before had received visitors by such a mode of transit, nor knew that the brook that fringed its fields was a "silent highway."

Such simple leaves from our home diary may seem scarce worth the printing; yet, as a brief record of human happiness, here let them stand.

It was not long before "Brother Alec's" health became so critical that we had little zest for such pleasures. Dr. Wilde was compelled to own that the danger was more imminent than he had expected in so short a period. The case, as regarded saving life, was hopeless, but a prolongation of it might possibly be secured by a more complete change than was afforded by Stanbrook. He recommended sea air. Of course the patient's relatives were at once communicated with. They had silently acquiesced, not only in his continuance at the Rectory, but at my own residence there with Gertrude.

It was well understood by Mrs. Raeburn that "Mr. Alexander" desired us both to be with him, and, perhaps, she clung to the hope that her thus acceding to his wishes

would, notwithstanding all his protestations, be found to be not without its reward hereafter. At all events, we had been left for weeks under the same roof. Even now, when it was decided to remove the invalid, Gertrude and I were to stay on together at the Rectory, while Mark and his wife accompanied Brother Alec to a small seaport on the western coast. John was, in the meantime, to manage his father's business at Kirkdale, as best he could ; and, as there were naturally many arrangements to be made in view of this, the attorney excused himself from coming in person to fetch his brother. Mrs. Raeburn herself was to do this, and my aunt could scarcely do less than invite her to spend the day with us and her cousin, which accordingly was done.

It must be surmised that, though Brother Alec had been medically "sentenced to death," and was in appearance greatly worse than he had been when he left the Priory, he was by no means confined to his own

apartment, but took his meals with the family, and even retired to rest no earlier than the rest of us. When it was proposed to alter our dinner-hour on this particular occasion, in order that he might arrive at home before nightfall, he combated that idea, and, Dr. Wilde being appealed to, agreed with him that the matter was not material.

Notwithstanding that our guest was so confirmed an invalid, and therefore, to some extent, a burden to our household, there were none in it, I think, but were sorry for his approaching departure. Unlike most persons in his sad condition, he was considerate as well as kind, to all, and his generosity was lavish. As for ourselves, including even my aunt, we should have been better pleased if he had stayed on with us to the last; but, confessedly small as was the chance of his being benefited by removal, no opposition could, of course, be made to the medical recommendation. His gratitude

manifested itself in a thousand ways, and his especial favour to myself was shown upon my birthday, which happened to take place at this period, by the present of a beautiful little skiff, which made the ancient pair-oar punt, as it lay beside it in the boat-house, look dingy and undignified enough. He had also purchased a horse for Gertrude, on which she sometimes accompanied my uncle on his rides; and seeing that Mrs. Hastings had a passion for such ornaments, he had increased my aunt's stock of jewellery by a magnificent diamond ring, for which it was a marvel to me how she found a vacant space on her fingers.

On the morning of his departure, which he believed to be his final farewell, he had a private talk with each of us.

"If I have been disappointed in my kinsfolk, Harry," said he to me in the difficult and almost painful fashion which his disease now compelled him to speak, "I have found dear friends where I had not

looked for them. God bless you, lad; and above all things, take care of Gerty."

I thought this injunction had reference to our future, and I confessed my hope that I should prove worthy of such a wife, in case I should be so blessed as to secure her.

"Yes, yes," sighed he, "you were made for one another, you two." Then he relapsed into silence, sunk in dreams, doubtless, of his own far-back youth, and of the wife he was about to rejoin in Heaven, from which he roused himself to shake my hand, and once more murmur, "Take care of Gerty."

Mrs. Raeburn arrived in a very gracious mood, and full of thanks to my aunt for her kindness to "Mr. Alexander." She expressed herself delighted at the improvement in Gertrude's health, and professed so great an interest in her occupations, while at Stanbrook, that the dear girl had to take her to the stable and the boat-house, where, no

doubt, she appraised in her own mind the cost of both horse and skiff. When my aunt (rather maliciously) drew her attention to the diamond ring, her visitor could not restrain a snort of indignation.

“That must have cost a pretty penny,” was her significant remark; and the idea of so much money having gone out of the family so weighed upon her spirits that, though she was wont to take advantage of all gratuitous entertainments to the uttermost, she scarcely touched a morsel at dinner.

During this repast, she, for the first time, suffered her dislike of the rector to show itself. She hated him—as one of her mean and sordid nature was likely to hate so generous and genial a man—and used to invent for the Kirkdale tea-tables all sorts of scandalous talks against him. One of them, I remember, did her ingenuity some credit, though greatly at the expense of her veracity.

There were two Stanbrooks in the "Clergy List," one of which was an excellent living, and Mrs. Raeburn, contended that my uncle owed his fortunate marriage to my aunt's having credited him with the possession of the richer cure instead of the poorer one. The story had, somehow, reached the ears of the two persons whom it most concerned, and one of them at least—my uncle—most heartily enjoyed it. He was as civil to Mrs. Raeburn upon the present occasion as host could be; all the more so, doubtless, because his wife could not conceal her antipathy to their guest; and yet she must needs take him to task about his theology. She accused it of being "rose-coloured," as, indeed, I am bound to say, it was; whereas, as might have been expected, the good lady would have had it flame-coloured. The controversy grew hot upon this point, as was only appropriate, and at last Mrs. Raeburn said, "I hope you are not one of those dreadful latitudinarians, Mr. Hastings, who

contend the punishment of the wicked is not to be eternal?"

"Well, madam," answered the rector, smiling, "that does not depend upon our respective wishes, you know, but upon what is the meaning of the Greek word 'aionios.'"

"And what does it mean, Mr. Hastings?"

"Well, if it does not mean eternal, it certainly means for some very great length of time—perhaps millions of years."

"Well, that's *some* comfort, at all events," answered Mrs. Raeburn with a sigh of relief.

At which I thought the rector would have strangled himself in his efforts to restrain his sense of humour.

After a most sad parting—for how should it not have been sad, when we never thought to meet him more, and poor Gerty could not say, "I hope to see you better," without tears that belied her words—Brother Alec went off in the yellow fly, with Mrs. Raeburn beside him, very fussy and attentive about his supplementary cushions. It

was a lovely evening, and Gerty and I ran across the lawn to wave our last adieu to him as he passed by the stone steps; but by that time he was leaning back with his eyes closed, as though utterly prostrated by his emotions. Mrs. Raeburn seemed to have already exhausted her solicitude on his account, and was gazing intently on the lake—so neither noticed our presence. We stood together in sad silence, watching the vehicle till it was hidden by an angle of the road. The noise made by its retreating wheels, and the murmur of a distant beck from the hill above us, alone disturbing the hush of night; the moon was rising and ploughing a silver furrow across the mere.

“How beautiful it would be upon the lake to-night, Gerty!” said I. “Would you like a row on the water?”

Gertrude eagerly, though gravely, assented. There was something, doubtless, consonant with her solemn thoughts in the suggestion which, with me also, had not been a mere

pleasurable impulse. Our talk, as we went towards the boat-house, was upon Brother Alec, and of the slender probability that we should ever see him alive again. It had been my intention to use the skiff, but the key of its chain, which ought to have been hanging on a particular nail, was nowhere to be found; this was the more singular, since, when Gertrude had brought Mrs. Raeburn down to the boat-house, she had left her there to fetch this very key from the house, in order that she might take her a few yards in the new boat, and she seemed quite positive about having hung it on the nail, as usual, when the little voyage was over. However, since the key was not there, I proposed, with a young man's impatience of anything opposing itself to his pleasure, to file away the chain—for the place was tool-house as well as boat-house; but Gertrude said; “To do that would be a pity, why not take the old punt?” So this we did. It had served our turn well enough

until the skiff had put us out of conceit with it, but it was certainly not an A 1 craft. In that portion of it where Gertrude and I sat, it was tolerably dry, but on the other side of the "well" there was generally a little water, which washed and rippled as we moved. There seemed to be more leakage than usual this evening, but, nevertheless, in we got, and a few strokes carried us into deep water. I pulled on, talking in a low voice to Gerty on the sad subject that occupied our thoughts, neither of us taking much heed to external objects, when suddenly I became conscious that the boat was "dragging" in a very unusual manner; it seemed also to be lower in the water than when we started.

Something in the expression of my face caused Gertrude the next instant to look round, and she then exclaimed, "Oh, Harry, the punt is full of water! It is almost up to the well!"

By that time I knew that it was sinking

under us, and was debating in my mind what was to be done. We were nearly in the centre of the lake, at least a quarter of a mile from the nearest land, and Gertrude could not swim a stroke. The lake was very deep, nor was there another boat upon it, except the skiff that lay chained in the boat-house, to bring us aid.

“We are sinking, Harry ! Is it not so ?” asked Gertrude in solemn tones, and regarding me very earnestly. “Take off your boots and swim to land.”

I did not heed her for the moment, for I was looking about me for a certain object, near to that spot, and which the moon might be bright enough to show me.

“Why should we both drown, Harry ?” continued she, piteously ; “you cannot save me, but you may still save yourself.”

“Thank God,” cried I, “there is the flag !” and I pulled frantically to where a metal pennant on an iron staff stood a few inches above the water. This was a mark

my uncle had caused to be put up since the arrival of the skiff, to show the presence of a hidden rock, which in dry weather, such as the present, came near enough to the surface of the lake to injure such a craft, though the punt, being flat-bottomed, could at all times float over it.

We were now close to this object, and I bade Gertrude seize the staff, and hold to it. When we ceased to move, the boat did not fill quite so rapidly, and I had time to throw off my boots and prepare for the task before me.

“When the boat goes down, Gerty,” cried I, earnestly, “you must cling to the flag, while I swim to fetch the skiff. If you do not lose your nerve, and thereby let go your hold, you will be safe, for the rock will sustain you.”

I was quite ready now; we were close together, her face, white with terror, and looking in the pale moonlight of an unearthly beauty, was close to mine. I kissed it for the first time—alas! I feared it was also for the last.

“My darling,” I murmured, “keep up your heart. Do not look on the water, lest you grow faint with fear; shut your eyes, or look on the hills.”

At that supreme moment (so curious are the workings of the human mind) I remembered that phrase of the Psalmist, “I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help,” as though it had some literal reference to our emergency.

“I shall pray to God, and think of naught but Him, and you, Harry,” answered Gertrude, calmly.

No help of man was indeed to be hoped for. If boats could have been procured, there was nobody to man them; the scattered population of Stanbrook had by this time retired to rest; not a light was to be seen, except from the window of the Rectory drawing-room, where my aunt and uncle, seated by the tea-urn, were wondering, no doubt, what had become of their “young people.” Inexorable Nature looked down

upon us on all sides in contemptuous beauty : the hills and valleys, that had so often seemed to greet us with their smiles, now smiled as placidly upon our doom. There were by this time many inches of water in the punt, and since in a few seconds it must needs be submerged, I persuaded Gerty to leave it, and trust herself to the flagstaff. Her head and shoulders were alone above water, but there was firm ground beneath her. When her weight was removed the boat lifted a little, and I had time to see her so far safe. As I beheld her clinging to that iron staff, so piteously, I was reminded of an allegorical picture I had somewhere seen of a female saint, who clings to the cross above the Rock of Life ; the moonlight on her brow seemed a very halo.

“ God save you, Gerty ! ” cried I, as the boat sank under me.

“ God save you, Harry ! ” came floating to me, in answer over the wave, as I struck out for the shore.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE “ DUMMY ” DEEDS.

I WAS a strong and skilful swimmer, but to make way through water with one's clothes on is a difficult matter for unaccustomed limbs, and I made but very slow progress. I soon began to feel numb and cold, and presently every stroke became such a labour that it seemed each one must be my last. If I had had only myself to save, I verily believe I should have given up the struggle and sunk, as the tired traveller sinks in the snow, to perish ; but the thought that my darling's life depended on my exertions spurred me on. If my limbs were numb, what must hers have been, to whom all

movement was denied ; to die would be to doom her to a death ten times more lingering and terrible than mine, and, therefore, I must needs live.

At last I reached the boat-house, and dragged myself up the steps ; then wasted perforce some precious minutes in gaining breath and strength before I took the file. A few strokes, however, separated the slender chain, and I was in the skiff and labouring—oh, how slowly !—at the sculls, in less time than I could have believed possible. Like one who comes from death to life after a wasting fever, I was weak, yet gathered strength with every breath I drew. I could see my darling's head above the waters yet, and made for her as straight as my dizzy brain would permit me.

"I am safe, Harry ; I am safe !" she cried, as I drew near, knowing those words would nerve me better far than any cordial ; but I dared not lose breath in answering her. I reached her somehow, and with infinite

difficulty contrived to get her into the frail boat, as cold, and white, and damp as death itself—or I. And yet, now that the worst was over, I could scarcely wish that the catastrophe had not occurred. We had risked death together, and ere we reached the shore I had won her promise that she would be mine for life—a recompense that paid for all.

Notwithstanding so severe an ordeal, Gertrude's constitution did not seem to take harm from this mishap, which showed, despite her recent indisposition, that it was naturally strong. I think, indeed, my aunt suffered more from the relation of our adventure, than we did ourselves from the experience of it. She shuddered, and shivered, and jingled her rings at the recital of our watery woes in a manner piteous to witness; nor would she permit Gertrude again to tempt the dangers of the lake until a life-belt of the latest construction had been sent for from town, without which she gave a

solemn promise never to enter the skiff. As this had to be blown out on each occasion before starting, and as neither of us had any breath to spare for the operation, through the laughter it created, it caused a good deal of delay in embarkation.

What had become of the key of the skiff we could not discover, and should probably have set it down among those mysterious disappearances of inanimate objects which occur in the best-regulated establishments, and the nature of which seems more worthy of investigation than many other matters which at present engage philosophic inquiry; but what made it look suspiciously like malicious design was the fact of a plug having been removed from the punt at the same time, the absence of which had caused our calamity. If it was a practical joke, it had very nearly been a fatal one; yet such it probably was; for though Stanbrook, as I have said, invited no tourist visitors, it had one or two knapsack-carrying, shilling-

seeking sons of commerce in the shape of pedlars, who occasionally visited it, and one of these had called at the Rectory on the day in question and been dismissed without a deal; and to this failure in commercial enterprise the sorry trick that had been played us was doubtless owing. The rector did not say much, but the activity with which he scoured the country for the next three days on his cob, armed with an enormous horsewhip, showed the direction in which his thoughts were tending. However, fortunately, as it turned out, for all parties, his quest was not successful.

About this time there arrived for my uncle—what was a very rare event with him indeed—a business letter. He hated business, and—perhaps because he was totally unfitted for such matters—despised it. He used to term it “that cumbersome and pretentious machinery for the transaction of affairs called Business;” and every communication on that theme which arrived

in the Rectory letter-bag was at once relegated to Mark Raeburn.

But Mark was far away with his sick brother at the seaside, and this matter was urgent. It referred to the expiry of the lease of certain contiguous houses in a London street in which my uncle had invested a large portion of his property, and which the writer was anxious to purchase *en bloc*, for the establishment of some emporium.

"Deuce take the fellow, how should I know when the lease expires?" asked my uncle comically, as though he were the last person in the world to be expected to know it. "The matter is your concern, Harry, as much as mine, for the money will be yours one day, so it is but just that you should take the trouble off my shoulders. Take the cob and ride over to the Priory to-day, and look at the lease. John Raeburn will give you a sight of it—he has the counterpart, of course—and then we needn't trouble Mark at all."

So off I went to Kirkdale, after an absence that had now extended to some weeks, nor had I any intention, even yet, of returning thither for good. As John was all alone, my uncle bade me bring him back with me for a day or two, if he could be spared from the office.

“Well, John, I am come to fetch you over to Stanbrook,” were my first words on meeting him, and I thought they would have lighted his face with pleasure, for he had no more real liking for legal pursuits than I had myself, and always welcomed a holiday. But to my surprise, he shook his head with all the gravity of Lord Burleigh, and pronounced the thing to be quite impossible.

“I am in sole charge here, you see, Sheddon, with only the clerks to help me, and I dare not leave the office.”

I did not feel bound to press the matter. It was likely enough that he had a good deal to do; indeed, my lively friend seemed

to have already grown older by some years under the burden of his unaccustomed responsibilities; and, moreover, the proverb that "Two is company but three is none" had great weight with me just then, and I had no personal desire to import a companion for Gertrude and myself to Stanbrook.

"Well, John, and what is the news?"

"My father is made mayor of Kirkdale," answered he, "and may wear a scarlet gown if he pleases. It is a great dignity, but his grey mare will be the better horse for all that."

"I don't doubt it," returned I drily. "But what is the news of your Uncle Alec?"

"The accounts of him are certainly better; but he does not seem to like the sea," answered John in a strange mechanical way, "and I should not be surprised if we had him back again here within the fortnight."

"I am afraid it does not much matter

where he goes, so far as his health is concerned," said I. "It seemed to me, when he left the Rectory, that it was merely a question of a few weeks, more or less, of life."

"Well, the doctor at Sandibeach," replied John, in the same unwonted tone, "seems to think better of him than Wilde did; and, at all events, gives the poor old fellow a longer lease."

I shook my head incredulously, and the mention of the word "lease" suggesting my errand, I at once went on to that, and explained its nature.

"Your uncle's lease will be in the box in the office, along with his other papers no doubt," said John, at once adopting his old cheery manners, "but I am afraid the governor has taken the keys with him."

This we found to be the case; but, nevertheless, on searching the house for them, we came upon other keys, one of which fitted the padlock that fastened the

box, and so I got it open. It was pretty full of papers, and, on turning them over to find the lease, I came upon certain securities the signature of one of which suddenly riveted my attention.

"Hullo! what have you got there?" cried John, perceiving my astonishment; "you mustn't be reading anything but the lease, you know."

He got up, rather excitedly, from his high stool, and came towards me as though he would have shut the box.

"Excuse me, John," said I, "but what I have got here demands some explanation. Do you see this signature that purports to be my uncle's?"

"Of course I do. 'Purports?' Why, of course it is your uncle's; whose else would you have it to be?"

"No one else's, of course. I would have it to be his own. But this is a forgery—not his own writing—John."

"A what?" cried he, turning very red.

"You must not talk like that, Sheddon. If there was a clerk in this room I would prosecute you for libel. It is a devilish serious thing, you know."

"It is, John," interrupted I, gravely; "so serious that I think I ought to carry this deed back to Stanbrook with me. I will take my oath that my uncle Hastings never wrote his own name here."

Here John burst into such a fit of laughter as I had never heard him indulge in before; he sent forth peal after peal, and held his sides as actors do upon the stage, while the tears absolutely rolled down his cheeks.

"Why, you stupid old fellow," gasped he, "is it possible that you are not aware that all the papers in these tin boxes are 'dummies?' Do you imagine that my father would suffer the securities of his clients to lie about on these shelves, to be got at by any common key, such as you have picked out of an old drawer? Suppose there was a fire—what would become of

them all then? Really, my dear Sheddon, if you are so very simple as all that, I am afraid we shall never make a lawyer of you. These are merely dummies, my good fellow, which are kept here for reference—the real deeds are not to be got at quite so easily. They are in fire-proof boxes in the bank cellars."

"But the lease here," argued I, "is properly signed. I can swear to my uncle's handwriting in this case; whereas, in the other, it is only a clumsy imitation."

"That is all as it should be, my good fellow; the lease is not a dummy, but a duplicate. Really, Sheddon, if you were not the good fellow I know you to be, such doubts as you have expressed would have annoyed me excessively. You may take the whole box away with you, so far as I care; but it is my advice to you, upon all accounts, not to do so, and especially not to repeat your injurious remarks, either here or elsewhere."

“My dear John,” replied I, a little ashamed of my intemperate language, though by no means convinced that it was only excusable on the ground of my ignorance, “I am really very sorry; but I always thought that these boxes held the actual deeds, and even seem to recollect you or your father having told me so.”

“Your memory must have played you false, then,” answered John, with stiffness. “Please to make a note of what is required as respects the lease, and then let me have the key again. I was wrong to permit the box to be opened without my father’s leave.”

I took the note, then gave him back the key. “I am very sorry for what has happened,” said I, frankly, “and for whatever I may have said under a misconception.”

“That is quite sufficient, my dear Sheddon. Of course it galled me that you should think it possible that there was anything wrong with your uncle’s securities. I

almost think I ought to tell my father, in order that he may explain the matter to Mr. Hastings."

"Well," said I, "if you wouldn't mind, John, I think that would be the most satisfactory course." I could see that my thus taking him at his word surprised and annoyed him immensely; but I had no intention of retracting.

His own explanation would, doubtless, have satisfied me had the matter concerned myself alone; but I felt that it was only right that my uncle should be informed of what still struck me as—to say the least of it—a peculiarity in the mode of dealing with business documents. John made no further remark upon the matter, and we parted on good terms; but I could see by his grave and serious air, which was with him a sign of extreme mental disturbance, that his sensibilities were deeply touched. Though by no means devotedly attached to his mother, he had an honest affection

for his father, I believe, and naturally resented any seeming imputation upon his good faith, for which I did not blame him. Nevertheless, the matter seemed graver to me the more I thought of it; and after dinner, that evening, I did not fail to tell my uncle all that had occurred.

He allowed that the thing looked “very odd;” he had never heard of “dummy” parchments, though it did not surprise him that such a system—which must necessarily double the price of “law” to the general public—should be in full swing. It was better, he agreed, that Mark should write and explain the matter.

In a few days the attorney did so, and his explanation was, in effect, what his son had already told me. The rector’s genuine securities reposed, he said, along with those of his (the attorney’s) other clients in the safe of the Kirkdale Bank. “And if you have the least doubt, my dear Hastings—I do not say of the probity of your old friend

and neighbour, but of the fact—you have only to apply to the bank-manager for a look at them."

I thought this rather an unpleasant way of putting the matter. Its effect was to overwhelm my uncle with shame and confusion; and I really believe it cost him an effort for some time even to get a cheque changed over the counter of Messrs. Bullion and Tissue, for fear it should be supposed that he had gone thither to resolve his doubts. A fortnight afterwards he got a note from "Brother Alec," informing him that, though not much improved in health, he had made up his mind to return to Kirkdale, since, after all, when one was sick, there was no place like home.

This communication, or rather the terms of it, for John had already informed me of his uncle's discontent with the seaside, astonished us considerably.

The old man's mind must have quite broken down, we all agreed, to have ex-

pressed himself in that way concerning the Priory.

Then, after a little, a note came to Gertrude from Mrs. Raeburn, to say that the invalid had returned, and begging her to bring her visit to the Rectory to a close, as she really could not spare her "dear companion" any longer. It was high time for me also to resume my legal studies; so Gerty and I returned to Kirkdale together, both feeling it very like going back to school after the holidays, yet pleased enough to feel that the misfortune was common to us both.

CHAPTER IX.

ALEC'S SICK-ROOM.

AT the Priory we found things duller than ever, and poor Brother Alec not even visible. The journey home had exhausted his little remaining strength, and it was necessary that he should keep his bed and recruit. This was nothing more than what Dr. Wilde had expected, and he declined even to come and see his patient. It was clear he could do nothing for him ; and since Mrs. Raeburn would not hear of his visiting him as a friend, without a fee, the sensitive doctor kept away altogether. I am bound to say that the old man's relatives were very assiduous in their attentions to him ; nothing

was omitted that could conduce to his comfort, and almost everything was done for him under their personal superintendence. Mark would spend hours talking with him by his bedside ; John read the newspaper to him ; and Mrs. Raeburn prepared his meals with her own hands. The sick man had arranged for the payment of his annuity by quarterly instalments, but of course his going to town in person to receive them was become out of the question ; and he wrote to the Insurance Office to that effect. His brain, Mrs. Raeburn protested, was still as clear as ever, and he took the same delight in his dumb favourites—if, indeed, the conversational Chico could be so designated. Their master's inaction and confinement to his bed, however, was taken in dudgeon by both dog and bird, for the former howled and whined in a most depressing manner, while at all hours of the night I heard the latter croaking and mumbling what sounded like anathemas through the partition-wall. This was

the more remarkable, since Mrs. Raeburn had informed me that what her brother-in-law seemed to crave for was perfect quiet, and expressed her regret that, under these circumstances, she could not admit me to his room. My uncle, however, rode over on one occasion, and insisted upon seeing his old friend, whom he described as looking better, rather than worse, but much disinclined for talk. Gertrude had also been privileged to visit the invalid once or twice, but of late this had been prohibited, on the ground that she had shown symptoms of a recurrence of the indisposition she had had before going to Stanbrook, and that the atmosphere of a sick-room was injurious to her. At last a day came when the patient was pronounced sufficiently well to receive me, a circumstance of which I was very ready to avail myself, since I could not understand why John Raeburn should have been so long permitted access to his uncle's chamber, while it had been denied to me. I set it down, indeed,

naturally enough, to a desperate endeavour on Mrs. Raeburn's part to influence the old man's feelings, at the last, in behalf of her son ; though, if Brother Alec was as well as she described him to be, I could not conceive how he himself submitted to such an arrangement. I had been always a favourite with him from his first arrival at the Priory, and our intimacy had greatly increased during his stay at Stanbrook ; whereas John he had rather tolerated than encouraged. However, Heaven knows it was with no feeling of jealousy of the latter, far less of resentment against the changeful whim of an invalid, that I now entered Brother Alec's apartment for the first time since my return to the Priory.

He was lying in bed, with his face turned towards the door, and therefore, to me, it was hid in shadow. Notwithstanding that it was a fine bright autumnal day, the sunlight was almost excluded from the room by Venetian blinds, an arrangement which made his

sunbrowned features still more sombre. His eyes were by no means so piercing as of old, and gazed out at me from half-shut lids; else, I agreed with my uncle, that he looked no worse than when I had seen him last. I noticed, too, that the hand which he held out to me was tolerably plump, and grasped my own with some vigour. His voice, on the other hand, was low, and he contented himself for the most part with answering my questions about his health, of which he spoke, as indeed was his usual custom, with careless cheerfulness. He did not feel himself much weaker in body than when at Stanbrook, he said, but that conversation was wearisome to his brain. "When John has read the newspaper aloud, that is almost enough for me," added he—an excuse, as I understood, for his not having desired my company. Of course I accepted the apology, though it struck me as singularly illogical; for why should I be more inclined to converse than John (who, indeed, was an in-

cessant talker), or less competent to read to him? Then he went on to speak of my uncle and aunt in terms of warm affection indeed, yet in conventional phrase, such as he had been by no means wont to use when under their roof. Without having any great originality, Brother Alec had always avoided, in the expression of his feelings, such cut-and-dried terms as he used now; and I read in them, more than in all else, the decay of his mental powers. What also struck me as a bad sign about him was, that my presence did not, as usual, suggest any reference to Gertrude; that subtle link which connects thought with thought—Association, appeared to have snapped already.

“Well, Chico,” said I, turning from the old man to his bird, which, to my surprise, was in its cage, and addressing it cheerfully, “and how are you?”

“Dead, dead!” responded the bird, stroking his scarlet plume, and regarding the heap of nut-shells at his feet as though

they had been a new-made grave. "Dead, dead! Only think of that!"

"Chico is not a cheerful companion for our patient," remarked Mrs. Raeburn, looking up from the book which she was reading, close by the window, where, indeed, alone light could be found for that purpose; "but I cannot persuade him to have that bird removed to another room."

"Let him be, let him be," murmured Brother Alec from the bed. He had already closed his eyes, as if exhausted. Mrs. Raeburn threw up her hands, as much as to say, "You hear! He will have it so!"

"But the dog must be much worse," observed I, speaking, like Mrs. Raeburn herself, in a whisper; "its noise at night is sometimes awful."

"That is so, Mr. Sheddon; but we have at last persuaded our dear friend, here, to dispense with the creature. Fury will leave after to-day."

Looking towards the subject of our talk,

for the first time I perceived, with great surprise, that, though occupying the same spot in the room as usual, the animal was chained to a staple of the wall.

“That measure of precaution was absolutely necessary,” explained Mrs. Raeburn, interpreting my glance. “The beast has taken such an antipathy to John. Indeed, when he goes, it will be for all of us a most happy release.”

I am quite sure Fury knew that Mrs. Raeburn was talking about him, and I think he knew what she said. At this ungracious reference to his departure, he fixed his bloodshot eyes upon her with a concentration of vision I have never seen except in a mesmerist, and uttered a menacing growl. “His master will miss him just at first, no doubt,” continued she, quietly; “but in the end he cannot be but relieved by his absence.”

Here Fury turned his blunt nose towards the ceiling, and, opening his enormous jaws,

gave utterance to a howl of anguish, so prolonged and deep that it might have stood for the coronach of his entire race. Even Brother Alec, well accustomed as he was to hear the voice of his favourite, raised his heavy eyelids at the sound, and feebly smiled. I thought it a good opportunity to wish him good-bye for the present, since he was obviously disinclined for further talk, and I did so.

"Mr. Alexander is easily tired," observed Mrs. Raeburn, looking up once more from her book. "It may have seemed hard to have debarred you from this room so long, Mr. Sheddon, but you now know for yourself that there was a reason for it."

There was no denying this fact; and yet the reflection that I was to be excluded from poor Brother Alec's presence for at least as long as I had already been, nay, perhaps, even until his demise, not only saddened but chilled me; a shudder crept over me at the thought of his lying in that darkened

room, watched by that hateful woman, and even with my feet upon its threshold, I hesitated to cross it.

“Perhaps, Mr. Sheddon, it would be more agreeable to your feelings,” remarked Mrs. Raeburn, coldly, “to see our dear invalid alone. If so, you can do so.” Then, reading my reply in my face, she rose from her chair, and with obtrusively careful tread, as though to remind me that I stood in a sick-room, she moved into the next apartment and closed the door behind her.

If Brother Alec had started from his pillow at that moment and cried, “Save me, save me from that woman!” I should not have been more astonished than I was by his total unconcern at this proceeding. I had certainly expected a smile of friendliness, perhaps even a whispered assurance that, notwithstanding that he had never sent for me, his sentiments towards me were what they had ever been; the presence of Mrs. Raeburn must surely have hitherto

restrained him from expressing his feelings ; and now she was gone he would be more like himself. But no ; he uttered not a syllable. He had noticed her leave the room, I saw ; yet he remained precisely as before, silent, motionless, without so much as turning his eyes towards me.

“I hope, Mr. Raeburn,” said I, earnestly, “that you are quite comfortable here, and want for nothing. If you have any wish—or fear,” (I said this very significantly, for I myself felt a shadowy apprehension of I know not what the while I spoke) “I beseech you to reveal it to me.”

“Thank you, Sheddon,” returned the sick man in low but distinct tones, “I am quite as I would be here ; my relatives are all very kind.”

His manner was cold, as though deprecating, if not resenting, my interference. It had been his wont, too, of late to call me “Harry,” and not “Sheddon,” and the change did not escape me.

“I hope,” said I, “that I have, at all events, not offended you, Mr. Raeburn?”

“No, no, lad, but I am very tired; that is all.”

He did not even put out his hand to me in farewell, but drawing the bed-clothes round about him, and feebly murmuring “Good-bye, good-bye,” he once more closed his eyes.

I left the room with a heavy heart, and not a little wounded by this behaviour on the part of the old man, which to me was simply inexplicable. I had occasionally witnessed the irritability produced by illness; my Aunt Eleanor was a sufferer from neuralgia, and under its influence would deal out her sharp words to everybody, without distinction of sex or age, and including even her medical attendants; but Brother Alec’s conduct was altogether different. Moreover, he had been heretofore distinguished for his patience under pain; so far from diminishing the tenderness of

his nature, his disease seemed rather to have intensified it.

"How did you find my brother, Sheddon?" whispered the attorney, who was sitting as usual in the office, accompanied by his two clerks, John having been sent for that morning to a neighbouring town, from which he was not expected to return until the following night.

"Better than I expected, sir, in some respects; but in others greatly changed."

"Ah, here!" sighed Mark, touching his forehead significantly; "that is what we all see. Mr. Wilde prepared us for that, you know."

I did not think it worth while to explain that I had found the sick man altered in feeling rather than intelligence, but simply nodded assent. "It's very sad," continued the attorney, "but only what we must expect. It is fortunate that he is so well in his wits, poor fellow, as he is, since tomorrow he will have business to transact.

The secretary of the Assurance Company is coming down to see him, and I have written to your uncle to be kind enough to ride over and meet him. They are old college friends, you know."

"So I heard," said I; "but how can my uncle help you; he is not a very good man of business, I fear?"

"That is true; but I have begged him to come over and smooth matters a bit. It will prevent Alec being excited if he sees old friends about him, and make the whole proceedings less formal."

"What proceedings?" inquired I, not with very good manners, perhaps; but I felt an extreme curiosity to know what possible use could be made of poor "Alec" under present circumstances by his devoted relatives.

"Well, it is merely a matter of form. Since my brother cannot go to town, the secretary must needs come down to convince himself of his being alive before making the

quarterly payment. Yet, merely passive as is the part our poor patient has to play, the idea of it agitates him in the most absurd degree. Though by no means without stamina, as you have seen, he exhibits all the nervousness of extreme debility."

I could not help remarking that, throughout that day, and still more upon the next, the attorney was greatly "agitated" also; which was the more unfortunate, since John being away, a larger share of the work of the office devolved upon himself. Our two assistants were mere copying clerks—little more than boys in age—and whose copying (from John's example, perhaps) included mimicry of their master as well as the duplication of legal documents. If the attorney employed them, by reason of their tender youth, with the idea that they would not keep so sharp an eye, as their elders might have done, upon his own proceedings, he was very egregiously mistaken. Often have I seen them tilt their ink-bottles and roll

their heads with significance when Mark was more than usually overcome with liquor, and much they hailed the occasional absences of his son and heir, in whom they recognised a master-spirit, whose eye no pantomimic performance could escape; and who (in Jove's absence) would often admonish them by casting a thunderbolt, in the shape of an office-ruler, with the most unerring precision.

The attorney, who had taken less and less of heed to his ways, in respect of drink, for some months past, seemed on this day to have cast off all decency; and, after dinner, could not be induced to leave his brandy-bottle even to come into the drawing-room. It was well, indeed, that it so happened, since he was really not in a fit state to present himself there. His son's presence, and especially his wife's, had hitherto been some restraint upon him; but now that the former was away, and the latter upstairs with the invalid, he seemed to have utterly

given way to his wretched passion. I found Gertrude looking so very distressed and pale, that I thought at first she had become acquainted with this fact.

"My darling Gerty," cried I, "what is the matter?"

"Oh, nothing," answered she, trying to smile; "at least, nothing worse than what I have experienced already. But I am certainly not quite well."

"You look deadly ill!" exclaimed I, with imprudent anxiety.

"That is because I have been in pain; but I am better now. Mrs. Raeburn has taken me in hand, and I think her treatment has been successful."

"What can you know about your illness? You ought to see Mr. Wilde at once," said I.

"No, no; there is really no necessity for that, Harry. He will only order me change of air again, which is ridiculous. Besides, I should be sorry to leave the house just now,

when, at any time, I may be called upon to make myself useful to poor cousin Alexander. Mrs. Raeburn is wearing herself out with her constant attendance upon him. I must say she behaves very well in that respect."

"If you must say so, you must, my dear," returned I, with some irritation, for my one cause of quarrel with Gertrude was her too great charity with regard to that objectionable woman. "I believe Mrs. Raeburn's attentions to him are merely mercenary, and arise from the lowest motives."

"Well, at all events, they cannot be 'mercenary' in my case," pleaded my darling; "and she has certainly done me good."

It was hopeless to argue with her against anybody while she wore that generous smile, which would, in my eyes, have vindicated a Mother Brownrigg; so I only hushed her lips in loverly fashion, and then turned to other topics.

What different pictures of human life

would that household have afforded, if some Asmodeus could have taken off the roof of the Priory that evening and surveyed us as the bee-master his hive. In the dining-room, the master of the house drinking alone, to drown such thoughts as even Asmodeus could not fathom; in the drawing-room, Gertrude and myself telling "the old story" with our lips and eyes, of which the world never tires; and, above-stairs, Mrs. Raeburn keeping solitary watch beside her well-tended but uncared-for relative.

It was fated to be the last evening for many a one to be spent in that fashion by me.

CHAPTER X.

A BUSINESS INTERVIEW.

ON the ensuing morning Gertrude did not appear at breakfast. She had "passed [but an indifferent night," said Mrs. Raeburn, "and was recruiting herself by a little sleep for a few hours." I hated that woman's rounded phrases, which always seemed to me framed with intent to deceive, and was by no means pacified by this statement. If Gertrude was not down to lunch, I resolved to call in Mr. Wilde upon my own responsibility.

In the meantime, several incidents took place. In order, doubtless, to keep his head quite clear for the transaction of the busi-

ness in hand that day, the attorney abstained altogether from his usual stimulant, the effect of which was most deplorable ; for even worse than the dram-drinker who continues to drink, is the dram-drinker who desists from doing so for a particular occasion. Then his system craves the usual fillip ; his spirits lie deep down, waiting for the summons of the fire-god ; his eyes lack lustre ; his hands are unsteady ; his tongue is chained. Throughout the forenoon Mark Raeburn exhibited all these symptoms, and, in addition, a most distressing anxiety. Unable to attend to business, notwithstanding that it had urgent claims upon him, he remained in the breakfast-room watching, with agitation, for his expected guests. Twice did he visit the office, to beg me to look in "Bradshaw" for the time at which Mr. Sinclair (the secretary) might be expected ; and when my uncle rode up before that hour, the attorney called me in, to help him (as he expressed it) "do the honours." Nothing could have been more

significant of the state to which this unhappy man had reduced himself, since, even within my remembrance, he had been remarkable for his genial manners and hearty welcome to all comers. Even the rector, who, with all his shrewdness, was by nature as unsuspicious as a child, remarked to me, with a raising of the eyebrow, when Mark happened to leave the room, that our host was "a cup too low;" a phrase which expressed, more literally than he suspected, the actual position of affairs. "Raeburn will play the deuce with the business, Harry, if he goes on like this, you know," he continued, "and leave a very poor thing for John."

It was characteristic of my uncle, under such circumstances, to think of John Raeburn's future, rather than of the present safety of his own securities; and also that he should have come over to Kirkdale upon the attorney's affairs, though he detested "business."

"Whatever Mark can want me over here

for," he went on, petulantly, "is an enigma to me. I know Sinclair, to be sure; and, indeed, but for my old college-acquaintance with him, I verily believe Alec would never have got his annuity. He looked so shockingly ill, poor fellow, that they thought it was a got-up case; that he would have jumped up with a 'Ha! ha! cured in an instant!' like the man in the quack advertisement, so soon as he had got his annuity; but why, now that he has got it——"

Here the attorney re-entered the room, and cut short my uncle's speculations; he had been upstairs, he said, to see that all was ready.

"My good fellow, one would think it was a surgical operation that was about to take place," observed the rector, good-humouredly, "instead of a simple legal formula—if, indeed, there is such a thing as simplicity in the law at all. I hope the patient is not in such a state of flutter as you seem to be?"

“Not at all, not at all, my dear Hastings; this is one of his good days.”

“Very well; then I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” said the rector, impulsively; “I’ll go up and keep him company till this secretary-bird arrives.”

“No, no, no, you must not do that,” answered the attorney, hurriedly. “Alec is tolerably composed, it is true, but when a sick man is expecting a visit, not from a secretary-bird—no, by Jove, but from a vulture, a fellow that will positively be benefited by his decease, and is anxious for it—why that, of course, gives him some perturbation.”

“Well, here is Sinclair,” observed my uncle, as a fly drove up to the front door, “so poor Alec need not remain on tenter-hooks any longer.”

The secretary was a grave and discreet personage, as befitted his post. Though a contemporary of the rector’s, he showed so austere beside him that, perhaps, for the

first time I recognised how young for his age my uncle was. In their very greeting there was all the difference in the world; the rector so frank and free, the secretary so reticent, reserved, and on his guard, as though he feared the other should be about to reveal some humiliating antecedents—reminiscences of his college career, which, however, I doubt not, was spotless. As to the attorney, Mr. Sinclair surveyed him with gimlet eyes, as a commissioner in bankruptcy might regard a gentleman accused of concealing property from his creditors; and I must confess that Mark Raeburn looked as if he had done it: anything more obsequious, nay, more cringing, than his manner, I had never beheld. “He was deeply grieved to have had to trouble Mr. Sinclair to come to Kirkdale, but his brother’s condition rendered his going to town out of the question, as Mr. Hastings, their mutual friend, would bear witness.”

“The medical certificate explained that much,” was Mr. Sinclair’s reply.

“True, true,” replied Mark, hastily, not, however, without impressing me at least with the conviction that he had forgotten all about it; “that, of course, was decisive. Now the question is, shall we go upstairs at once, and lunch afterwards, or take some refreshment in the meantime. You must surely stand in need of it, Mr. Sinclair, after your long journey?”

My belief is, that the attorney would have given a ten-pound note for the opportunity of taking a glass of sherry at that moment. Unhappily, the secretary was that too-conveniently-constituted sort of man who is never in a hurry for his food. He would prefer to wait, he said, until the business which he had come about should be completed.

“Perhaps you are right,” said Mark; “for, after all, the whole affair will not take five minutes, you know.”

Mr. Sinclair bowed stiffly, looking the

while as though he did not know anything of the kind.

“I am quite at your service,” said he.

Then they all trooped upstairs—my uncle, then the secretary, and lastly Mark, who looked as pale as the sick man, who was awaiting them, in the bed-room, and stumbled at every other step. I heard Mrs. Raeburn come out into the passage and cry “Hush!” at the noise he made.

The interview lasted nearer fifty minutes than five, and then the three came down again to luncheon. Mark looked utterly shattered, and scarcely spoke a word; my uncle was graver than before; the secretary, on the other hand, seemed to have thawed a little. He was the only one, after all, who proved to have an appetite, though the attorney showed a great devotion to the sherry.

“I am afraid, Sinclair,” said the rector, “that you will have no occasion to come down here three months hence. Our friend above-stairs seems in evil case.”

“Yes, indeed. Speaking in my professional capacity, however, I may say, that, in the case of life annuitants, to die is the exception—to live, the rule.”

It is extraordinary how persons not given to joking will, when they do joke, select the most inopportune occasions for it. It seemed, however, in this case to strike the speaker that he had been, under the circumstances, a little too facetious, for he turned to Mark and added, “Seriously speaking, my dear sir, I have known persons survive for many years who were apparently even nearer to death’s door than your poor brother.”

“Then, since he does not suffer, let us hope his life will be prolonged,” said the rector, earnestly.

“Personally, I echo your sentiments with all my heart, Hastings,” observed the guest: “but, in the interest of my employers, you know, I am bound to wish a short life to their annuitants.”

I am sure, though this man had been a college acquaintance of my uncle's, that he could never have been his friend; the rector looked at him now as if he could have kicked him; while the attorney, on the other hand, seemed to be by no means displeased with his visitor.

"I hope, Mr. Sinclair, we shall have the pleasure of seeing you down here next quarter-day, which will be in December," said he. "I mean—that is, that you will not send a deputy."

"You are very good, Mr. Raeburn. No, I always look to these matters myself; though, in this case, indeed, my personal attendance will, for the future, be hardly necessary; if Mr. Hastings here—'clergyman of the parish,' our articles say, but it can't signify which parish—will be good enough to 'certify,' that will be quite sufficient; and, of course, we shall have your brother's signature if he is able to write it. I have known an annuity paid for

years to a man who, from physical weakness, could only put a cross instead of his name."

"There is nothing of that sort as yet in poor Alec's case," remarked my uncle. "I thought his signature to the receipt particularly vigorous, considering his condition in other respects."

"It was so," assented the secretary, "and that is a very bad sign—I mean, a very good one, in a case of this description. Indeed, I think, my dear Hastings, that you and your friend have stolen a march upon us after all, and that he will live to sign many a quarter's receipt."

For all that, it was plain that the "vulture," as Mark had termed him, was, in his professional capacity, well pleased with his interview, and confident of Brother Alec's speedy demise; while my uncle was proportionally cast down. As to the attorney, the wine seemed to have made another man of him, and he so skilfully manipulated the

ungenial secretary, that they parted quite good friends.

"I am sorry," said Mark, as the other stepped into his fly, "that you have delegated your duties here to Mr. Hastings, since it will deprive us of the pleasure of giving you a Christmas welcome at the Priory."

"Thank you, thank you; but, you see, it's a great relief to me if I can get these matters done by deputy. If Hastings were not personally known to me—a man so completely trustworthy—the matter could have been scarcely managed in that way, in a case in which such a considerable sum"—he whispered something in Mark's ear, and held up his hands by way of finish to the sentence.

"Oh, your company can stand it," cried Mark, laughing; "it is as rich as Dives."

"Poor, poor as Lazarus, I do assure you," replied the secretary, with a deprecating smile; and away he drove.

“A good man of business that, depend upon it,” observed the attorney to my uncle, approvingly, as the vehicle rolled away.

“I shouldn’t wonder,” returned the rector, drily; “he’s a deuced vulgar fellow, however, at all events.”

The rector, who was anxious to be off, had left, as usual, his horse at the inn in Kirkdale, having always various errands to transact in the little town upon his wife’s account. I was about to set out with him thither, in order to have the opportunity of calling on Mr. Wilde, when it suddenly struck me that such a course might be open to objection. I was fully resolved that Gertrude should see the doctor, but it was better, I reflected, that he should be sent for, if possible, by somebody else; it would be taking too much upon myself that I should do this thing at my own suggestion, and without even the permission of her own family.

"You know poor Gertrude is ill again?" said I to my uncle, as he was about to take leave of his host.

"Not ill, I hope, Harry," returned he. "Mrs. Raeburn told me that she felt a slight indisposition, but would be downstairs to dinner."

"Gertrude herself, however, informed me last night," answered I, gravely, "that she had experienced a return of the same malady of which Mr. Wilde thought so seriously when she went to Stanbrook."

"I say, Raeburn, do you hear that?" inquired my uncle sharply.

"Yes, yes; I am very sorry," replied the attorney, starting from a "brown study," in which he had been enveloped since the secretary's departure. "I can't think what has come to Gertrude; she never used to be so delicate."

"Yes; but the point is, what is to be done?" returned my uncle, impatiently. "Mrs. Raeburn is naturally engrossed in

her attendance on your brother, and has neither time nor thought to give to others ; and as we are going into the town, don't you think it would be just as well if Harry should look in upon Mr. Wilde and ask him to step up ? ”

“ Well, really, you know that would be rather embarrassing,” answered the attorney, with unwonted decision. “ In point of fact, very much so, because Mr. Wilde has protested he is of no use to Alec, and will only visit him as a friend.”

“ But who wants him to see Alec ? Here is Gertrude ill, or getting ill, and no one to look after her. I am sure Mrs. Raeburn would thank him for taking this second responsibility off her shoulders.”

“ There is something in that,” said the attorney, reflecting, perhaps, how often his wife had adverted to responsibility No. One for the last six months. “ By all means send Wilde in ; only make him understand, please, that it will be a pro-

fessional call, and to Gertrude only. As lawyers, we are bound to protest against gratuitous advice of all kinds, are we not Sheddon? Good-bye, rector, and thank you for coming to see us through our little business affair. In future, you know, I shall regard you with increased respect, as the plenipotentiary of the Assurance Company. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XI.

FOREBODINGS.

My uncle looked very thoughtful as we walked to the town together, and kept for some time an unusual silence.

“My dear Harry,” said he, presently, “you know, I hope, that I am the last man in the world to ask you to reveal what the laws of hospitality teach you to keep secret, but Mark’s behaviour has been so very strange to-day, that, unexplained, it may make my suspicions worse than what are warranted by the actual facts. In one word, then, do I do him an injustice in concluding him to have become a sot?”

“Well, really, uncle, I don’t like to say

that ; but he certainly drinks more than is good for him. A good deal more."

"Brandy?" inquired the rector, significantly; "aye, I thought so. It is my conviction that he was on the verge of delirium tremens this morning. Nothing else could account for the way in which he conducted himself in his brother's room. He was as white as a sheet, and trembled like a girl who is going to have her ears pierced for earrings. It is fortunate for Alec that his sister-in-law has got some pluck in her, for a more useless person in a sick room than her husband I never beheld. Then, at lunch, how he gulped down the wine—and very bad wine it is; I wonder how your stomach stands it, Harry?—till he gradually won back his wits and spirits. I am afraid poor Mark is going to the bad."

"Do you think his brother noticed it?" inquired I.

"Not to-day; he could notice nothing,

poor fellow ; he just answered the few questions that secretary creature put to him, and signed his name, while Mrs. Raeburn held him up ; that was about all. But Alec has noticed it ; told me of it, in fact, himself, when he was at Stanbrook ; and, between ourselves, I think the knowledge of it had something to do with the disposition of his property. Mark was always speculative, he says, and under these sad circumstances would play ducks and drakes with any amount of money ; which, indeed, is likely enough. I begin to think, even as matters stand, that we have done Mrs. Raeburn wrong in crediting her with parsimony."

"What, in shirking the halfpenny bridge, uncle ?" cried I, laughing.

"Well, that was rather a striking instance of economy, I allow ; not even the proverb tells us to take care of the halfpennies ; but I have reason to believe that the Raeburns are not well off. Even with this immense

allowance from Alec—of which, by-the-by, none of their neighbours know but ourselves—they have a difficulty to make both ends meet. So, in future, my dear boy, don't turn up your nose at Mrs. Raeburn's little side dishes, or object to the sherry."

"My dear uncle," pleaded I, "it was you who objected to the sherry. I have only lifted up my voice against the ginger wine."

The rector laughed and jingled his keys. "Pooh, pooh, when I was at your time of life, nothing came amiss to me short of anti-monial wine; if the quality is indifferent, then it will teach you moderation. Well, here we are at the doctor's; and I have a lot of things to get for your Aunt Eleanor."

So at Mr. Wilde's door we parted. For a wonder he was at home, though just about to set out on his afternoon "round." He came forward to meet me with rather an anxious and inquiring look, but I thought little of that, since any one's arrival, to a

doctor (with whom visits of ceremony are not common), must always portend something serious.

“Nothing wrong at the Priory, I hope?” were his first words.

“Nothing to be alarmed about, I believe; but Gertrude, that is, Miss Floyd——”

Mr. Wilde made an impatient motion with his hand, as though he would have said, “I know all about that, and even if I did not, what does it matter how you call her? Come to the case.”

“She is not well,” I went on. “There is not much the matter, as I understand, but she has had a return of those symptoms for which you recommended her change of air in the autumn.”

“Who told you this, Sheddon?”

“Gertrude herself, last evening. I thought her looking very unwell, and she confessed to me that she had been feeling so; had been in great pain, indeed; but that Mrs. Raeburn had prescribed for her, and suc-

cessfully. This morning, however, she did not appear, and is still in her room, and that is a bad sign, for Gertrude is not one to give in unless she is compelled, you know."

"Did she herself send you to fetch me?"

"No, she knows nothing of my coming; she hates to have any fuss made about her; and, besides, I think she has not much belief in your 'change of air' remedy, though it did her so much good last time. But I think you should see her, for she has no one to look after her except Mrs. Raeburn, whose time is almost wholly taken up with her other patient."

"Did Mrs. Raeburn tell you to come for me?"

"No; but her husband did. He quite agreed with my uncle (who has been over at the Priory this morning) that you should see Gertrude, for the reason I have mentioned—that Mrs. Raeburn has enough on her hands already."

“I see, I see,” said Mr. Wilde, thoughtfully. “Then she doesn’t even know that I have been sent for?”

“I suppose not. By-the-by, Mr. Raeburn, himself, had a momentary hesitation about my fetching you, lest you should not come professionally. He declares that you shall not see his brother, ‘as a friend,’ any longer, but must take your fee like a man.”

“Then I shall not see his brother at all,” observed Mr. Wilde, bluntly. “Indeed,” added he, with a smile at his own vehemence, “there would be no use in my so doing. But, of course, Miss Floyd’s case is a different matter. I will be with her within the hour, you may depend on that.”

I returned to the Priory at once, by the way that, from the doctor’s house, was the shorter—namely, through the garden, where, greatly to my surprise, I found Mrs. Raeburn, pacing up and down the great gravel walk. She walked with long steps, with head depressed and her hands clasped behind

her, in the manner of the elder Bonaparte, and so deep in thought was she, that she took no notice of my approach till I came quite close to her. Then she started, and gave me a not very pleasant look.

“I should have thought, Mr. Sheddon,” said she, “that with John away, Mr. Raeburn could ill have spared your assistance in the office this afternoon?”

If anything could be more impertinent and offensive than this speech, it was the manner in which it was spoken; the malice of the tone I could understand, but for the insolent triumph that mingled with it, I was utterly at a loss to account. If she had been a man, I hope I should have known how to answer her; being, by courtesy, a female—and by an extreme stretch of it, even a lady—I could not, of course, express myself as I wished to do.

“I went into the town, madam, at Mr. Raeburn’s own request,” replied I, coldly, “to fetch the doctor.”

“What?”

If I had said “the Asiatic cholera,” she could not have looked more astonished, disgusted, and, I may add, alarmed. Her idea probably was, as I imagined, that the attorney, feeling himself indisposed after his luncheon (as indeed well he might), was about to incur the expense of a physician’s visit.

“The doctor,” repeated I, in the mildest of tones. “Your husband and my uncle both agreed that your constant attendance upon Mr. Alexander Raeburn would prevent your paying the necessary attention to Miss Floyd, and that, since she was no better this afternoon, Mr. Wilde ought to be sent for. I have, therefore, been to fetch him.”

“You have, therefore, committed a piece of extreme impertinence, sir!” exclaimed Mrs. Raeburn, vehemently. “What has your uncle, or what have you, to do with the arrangements in my house, or with Miss Floyd at all? If I thought her ill,

do you suppose I should not have sent for Mr. Wilde, myself? Do you imagine that the miserable stipend which is paid for your maintenance here is so important to us that, for the sake of it, we are prepared to put up with any amount of interference? We are not Mr. Hastings's poor parishioners, that we should be subject to his guidance and dictation, I believe. He has meddled and marred enough in our affairs already, and I daresay not without his reward."

"You speak in enigmas, madam," said I. "I only know that my uncle came over here, to-day, at your husband's own request, and at great inconvenience to himself; and I should think it very unlikely that he was paid for it. As for myself, I have never done anything to offend you, that I am aware of; unless, perhaps, by showing some sympathy towards your brother-in-law at a time when you were not so passionately devoted to him as you are now."

When excessively angry, Mrs. Raeburn

was wont to exhibit the unladylike peculiarity of gulping something down in her throat, and moistening her lips with her tongue, which, I believe, is the habit of some serpents before shooting out their fangs.

“You are a most simple and unself-seeking young gentleman, no doubt,” sneered she. “It is quite a pity that such a disinterested youth should become a lawyer; at all events, I for my part regret exceedingly that he ever came here to learn his trade.”

“Your hospitality and good manners are proverbial, my dear madam,” returned I, with my best bow. If this woman intended, by her insults, to drive me out of the house, as she had once driven “Brother Alec,” she would be disappointed, I reckoned; for on the day that I quitted the Priory—or at least thereabouts—I fully intended that Gertrude should quit it also. It was my firm resolve not to leave her at the mercy of her host and hostess, unprin-

cipléd as they both were, though in different ways, and bent, perhaps, as much as ever—though of late they had concealed their intention so cleverly—of securing the poor girl for John.

“You talk of hospitality, young man,” continued Mrs. Raeburn, suddenly, after a pause, during which she seemed to have in a great measure recovered the control of her temper, “but you have outraged mine, in making love to Gertrude.”

Had this woman read my very thoughts, and was she now about to bid me quit her house for an offence which, however venial, I could not deny. In that case, what help could there be for me—and for Gertrude? Old Alec’s warning, “Take care of Gerty,” rang once more in my ears, and I felt sick at heart. The very emergency of the case, however, made me bold.

“I honestly confess, madam,” said I, “that I have not only sought to win your cousin’s love, but I have won it. I loved

her before I became your guest ; acquaintance with her under your roof has only made me more alive to her worth."

"You did not know, for instance, until you came here, that she was an heiress, perhaps?" observed Mrs Raeburn, bitterly.

"Such is actually the fact, madam. It is waste of breath, I fear, to tell you that that knowledge has not moved me towards her in the least ; yet so it is."

Mrs. Raeburn sniffed a sniff that was the quintessence of incredulity. "And you did not think it unbecoming to take advantage of my cousin's youth and simplicity in winning her affections, without applying in the first place to her guardian, my husband ; or to her natural protector and counsellor, myself?"

I was silent, for I had certainly never dreamt of doing any such thing.

"You may tell me, perhaps," she went on in her didactic style (which showed she was quite herself again), "that Gertrude

met you half way, and was therefore equally to blame——”

“To blame !” cried I, indignantly.

“Permit me to finish, sir. I say you may attempt to shelter yourself under the plea that Gertrude might herself have made your attentions known to me. You would be so far right, in that she ought to have done so. When she becomes your wife, I hope you may never be reminded of her want of confidence to me by any concealment as regards yourself. It is, however, not a pleasing trait in a young woman.”

That might or might not be. I thought to myself that Gertrude had many other pleasing traits, at all events, that would atone for the reticence in question ; and if she had been charged with much worse things, I would cheerfully have forgiven her accuser, since those words, “when she becomes your wife,” were sweeter to me than honey and the honeycomb. I had never heard them from any other lips, and to find

them upon Mrs. Raeburn's, astonished and delighted me above all measure. She had made up her mind then, however she might regret the fact, that our union was decided upon, and showed herself submissive to Fate; and I began to entertain a sincere admiration for this remarkable woman—as a female philosopher.

Throughout this somewhat incisive talk of ours we had been drawing gradually near the house, and, at this moment, the keen ear of my companion caught the sound of the front-door bell, which announced Mr. Wilde's arrival, and she instantly hurried within doors. She accompanied the doctor to Gertrude's room, while I remained in the hall, awaiting with anxiety his report. Mrs. Raeburn and he came downstairs together, the former talking confidentially in low tones. It was her design, I fancied, to ignore my presence; but, after her late acknowledgment of my relations with Gertrude (however expressed), it was clear, by her own

showing, that I had a right to put my questions.

"How did you find Gertrude?" said I, boldly, since I saw Mrs. Raeburn was resolved upon not leaving us alone. I had addressed myself to the doctor, but she answered for him.

"There is nothing to be alarmed about," said she, coldly.

"Nothing at present," added Mr. Wilde, in grave correction. "Miss Floyd's condition is, however, unsatisfactory to me. I have just been telling Mrs. Raeburn that the case is a perplexing one, and, if the symptoms do not abate, it will be for her to consider whether she should not call in another opinion."

"We have all of us, including Gertrude herself, Mr. Wilde, the most perfect confidence in your skill," observed Mrs. Raeburn, graciously. "If you have the least anxiety about the case, I hope you will look in to-morrow."

“I will certainly do that, madam,” answered Mr. Wilde. “In the meantime, I must rely upon your judgment as to the administration of the medicine.”

“That shall be attended to without fail, and by my own hands.”

Mr. Wilde was by this time drawing on his gloves.

“How is your other patient to-day?” inquired he.

“Much the same; his condition, indeed, is exactly what your sagacity foresaw it would be. This afternoon he is somewhat fatigued, having had to undergo a business interview; else the change from day to day is scarcely perceptible.”

“Just so. You will please to note very carefully any alteration of the symptoms as respects Miss Floyd. It is just possible that she may be quite herself to-morrow; whereas, as I told you——”

“We will hope for the best,” interposed Mrs. Raeburn, cheerfully. “If care can

effect it, you may rely upon finding a great improvement."

I had no opportunity, even had I had excuse, for further inquiry, for Mr. Wilde, having mounted his horse, here rode off at his usual speed; but I was very far from being satisfied with what little I had extracted from him. The case must, indeed, be a serious one, if a man of his skill acknowledged it to be "perplexing," and even suggested another opinion. I felt profoundly dejected; all the more so, perhaps, from the exhilaration I had experienced not half an hour ago. The happiness that I had then so securely counted upon seemed now gradually slipping from my grasp. I felt like one who, so far from anticipating success, almost despaired of it, as being too great a stroke of good fortune to fall to him—a presentiment that seldom, alas! fails of fulfilment. I went to the office, and strove to forget my vague forebodings in pursuing my customary work. Had I taken

up some favourite author, it would not, perhaps, have availed me better, for the enchanted wand of genius that can make us forget grief and want, and even the sharp sense of pain, is powerless to allay anxiety ; but, as it was, I could do nothing but think this thought—"Suppose my darling were to die !" Even my occupation itself, whimsically cruel, suggested fears ; the oft-repeated legal term, "whereas," reminded me of the doctor's parting words to Mrs. Raeburn. "It is just possible" (*i.e.*, a miracle might work it !) "that she may be quite well to-morrow ; whereas, as I told you——" What had he told her ? What dark alternative had he prophesied in case there should not be an improvement ? A chill at my heart was the reply.

Presently John Raeburn came in from his expedition, looking very pale and fagged. It would have been more obnoxious to my feelings, perhaps, if he had been lively and talkative as usual ; yet his unaccustomed de-

jection intensified my gloom. His father and he scarce interchanged a word as to his proceedings, and presently they left the room together and went up to Brother Alec.

I was alone and remained downstairs in that dreary house, which seemed to have become a hospital; muffled footsteps, muffled tones overhead, were the only sounds that broke the silence, except the ticking of the clock on the staircase and the melancholy monotone of Chico—"Dead, dead! think of that!" heard whenever his master's door was opened. If Death was not in that house already, he seemed to be standing at its threshold, with a finger on his fleshless lip.

CHAPTER XII.

A CLUE.

GERTRUDE was very far from being “herself again” on the morrow, and Mr. Wilde’s face, when he came down from her chamber, was even graver and more perplexed than on the previous day. I was determined upon this occasion to speak with him alone, and evaded Mrs. Raeburn by walking out of doors, and along the road into the town until the doctor overtook me. He would have cantered by with a wave of his riding-whip and a cheerful nod of his head, if I had permitted him; but when I held up my hand and called to him, he instantly drew in his rein with a “What is it, Harry?”

“Mr. Wilde,” said I, earnestly, with my fingers upon his horse’s mane, “for Heaven’s sake, tell me the truth about Gertrude. I have a right to ask it, for she has promised to one day become my wife. What is the matter with her? Conceal nothing from me, I entreat you. Is she—is she dangerously ill?”

“My poor boy,” said the doctor, kindly, “you ask too much. I would tell you the truth about Miss Floyd—at least I think I would—if I knew it myself; but at present I do not know it. I only suspect what is the matter.”

“And what is it you suspect?”

“I will tell you at another time, not now, Harry,” answered he, evasively. “Even my suspicions have as yet no certain ground, and a doctor does not like to be made to eat his own words, you know. As to the young lady’s being dangerously ill, I can be a little explicit. I do not think she is. She is certainly in no immediate danger.

Still, if matters do not improve with her, the case must needs be very serious."

"And can I do nothing—nothing, Mr. Wilde!" cried I, imploringly.

The doctor looked at me very hard, nursing his chin in his hand; then slowly shook his head.

"No, Harry, you can do nothing—directly. But, if anything unusual occurs—if Miss Floyd should be taken suddenly ill, for instance—then you will come to me as fast as your legs will carry you. It will not, you will understand, be necessary for you to wait to be sent in that case."

"I should think not, indeed. I will come like the wind," said I, eagerly.

"And in the meantime," continued Mr. Wilde, "it may be worth while, perhaps, to take note, so far as you can, of how the patient is looked after. I don't doubt that every care will be taken of her; but Mr. Alexander, of course, absorbs a good deal of Mrs. Raeburn's attention; and it

may be advisable—indeed, it may be absolutely necessary—to employ a nurse. John mentions sometimes, you tell me, how many hours his mother has been sitting with his uncle. Well, in such a case, she cannot have been with Miss Floyd, you know. Mrs. Raeburn thinks, like some other ladies in her position, that she can attend to everything and manage everybody ; yet there may be neglect for all that. You may, therefore, play the sensible part of watch-dog with advantage. If the time should come when you may be of greater service, I will not fail to make use of you.”

“Thank you, thank you,” cried I, earnestly. “You will come every day and see her, will you not ?”

“Yes, my lad, yes.” He held out his hand, which was unusual with him, with an encouraging smile, and bade me be of good hope. Yet, as he rode away, I noticed that his face grew very grave again.

He came the next day, and the next, for

weeks, with varying reports as to my darling. Sometimes she would rally considerably, though she never became well enough to come downstairs; at others, it was plain that her progress was not towards recovery, but towards that other pole which those who love the sufferer dare not name, but the sense of whose icy neighbourhood chills them to the core.

In that gloomy house there was not one ray of cheer except when my Aunt Eleanor drove over to see Gertrude, which she did twice or thrice. Her words were always words of comfort.

“Gerty is young, Harry,” said she; “and she will get over this. If I could only carry her off with me to Stanbrook, she would be well in a week.”

But there was no talk, even from Mr. Wilde, of moving Gertrude now; she could not have borne the exertion, even had it not been the depth of winter, as it was by this time become; yet I quite felt with

Aunt Eleanor that the atmosphere of the Briary was enough to extinguish any one, however vivacious, let alone a sick person. "My dear, I believe it would put out a candle—like fire-damp," said my aunt, whose *forte* was not science; "while having that horrible vampire to wait upon her must be anything but conducive to recovery."

I watched the vampire, according to Mr. Wilde's instructions, but was bound to confess that she seemed very assiduous in her attentions to Gertrude. Nothing, too, appeared to Mr. Wilde to be left undone that should be done, or that he had directed to be so; and yet my heart forboded, with ever-menacing gloom, that, notwithstanding all this care, my darling was passing away from us. Another opinion had been consulted without any change being adopted in the treatment of the case. Mr. Wilde was doing all he knew, and all that science knew, for the patient, said the new doctor. The issue was not in mortal hands.

My nervousness and anxiety grew so excessive that I felt that I myself was on the brink of adding a third to the sick-list at the Priory. My appetite failed me, and sleep deserted my pillow. My brains, like my eyes, were ever on the watch. At this period—it was the day before the second quarter came round of Brother Alec's annuity payment, and my uncle was expected on the ensuing morning to give the necessary certificate—a circumstance so curious occurred that it almost made me fear that my wits were failing—that it was the result of an over-wrought imagination, and not reality. I was retiring one night to my own room, leaving the attorney and John below-stairs discussing their gin and water—which, in Mrs. Raeburn's absence, had become a nightly institution with them—when, on passing Brother Alec's door, I perceived it to be ajar; the firelight only flickered through the crack, showing that in all probability the sick man was alone, and, indeed, I heard

Mrs. Raeburn's voice speaking in low tones in Gertrude's apartment, which was opposite. In a general way, and indeed throughout the daytime, Brother Alec's room was kept religiously guarded, nor had I been admitted to it since the occasion I have described, now three months ago ; neither had Mr. Wilde seen him throughout that time, during which he had been reported to be much in the same condition as usual. Acting on a sudden impulse, I blew out my candle and stepped into the room, leaving the door unclosed behind me. All things within looked as when I had seen them last, except that the chair in which Mrs. Raeburn was used to sit had been removed from the window to the bedside. It was, however, of course empty ; the book only of the indefatigable watcher lay on the seat, ready to be resumed when she returned. Downstairs, I had never seen her with a book, except on Sundays, when she had been wont to read family prayers in a rasping voice, be-

fore her duties as hospital nurse had interfered with that practice. Not a sound was to be heard; not even the breathing of the invalid, whose form I could distinctly perceive, though his face was turned from me.

“If he were asleep,” thought I, “I should surely hear him breathe,” so it could be no harm to speak to him.

“Mr. Raeburn, Mr. Raeburn,” said I softly; then a little louder, “Mr. Raeburn, Mr. Raeburn!”

But, whether I spoke soft or loud, there was no reply: a cinder dropping on the hearth, and that clicking of the grate which is always heard where fire is kept up continuously, alone broke the silence of the sick-room. My nerves, which had been wrought up to a high pitch, began to be painfully excited, and fearing I scarce knew what, yet resolute to know the worst, I touched Brother Alec on the shoulder, and again called him by his name. He neither

moved nor spoke, but the hoarse monotonous voice of Chico suddenly broke forth from some shadowy corner with this reply, "Dead, dead, dead! Only think of that!"

I did think of it; I had been thinking of it all along; and the expression of the thought thus so eerily conveyed brought the dews of terror to my forehead. I fled noiselessly to my own room, where I lay awake for hours listening to that melancholy refrain, deadened by distance, yet only too distinct to my harassed ear, and picturing to myself that dumb and motionless figure with the watcher by its side. Presently, waking from a feverish sleep, I heard, or thought I heard, some movement beneath my bed. It could not be the bird, since he was still repeating his sepulchral sing-song in the next room; it could not be the bull-dog, for Mrs. Raeburn had sent him away months ago, "to a friend who could be trusted to take care of him;" in other words, as I shrewdly suspected, he had been

poisoned. For all I knew, up to this hour, it might have been a mouse ; but I got up and lit the candle, and lifted up the valance of the bed. To my horror, its light flashed upon a coffin ! It was new and large, and had an inscription in gilt letters on the lid, which I did not stay to read, but I fled with trembling limbs to John's apartment. I was no coward, but my nerves were altogether upset, and I had become a prey to my own morbid imagination. My conviction was that Brother Alec was dead, that his coffin was actually prepared for him, and that, somehow or other, he had come to his end by foul means.

John himself looked scarcely less scared than I when I awoke him with this intelligence, which I took no pains to soften in expressing it.

“ Uncle Alec dead ? ” cried he, presently, when he had got his colour back ; “ that would be a pretty business, my good fellow, when he is going to draw his quarter's in-

come this very morning. You must be out of your mind, Sheddon !”

“At all events, he neither spoke nor moved, I tell you, when I called him by name, and even shook him ; and I am perfectly confident he was not asleep.”

“That is nothing,” answered John, confidently ; “he will sometimes lie for hours without taking notice of anything or anybody, then, all of a sudden, he becomes quite himself again.”

“Let us go into his room and look at him,” cried I resolutely, for whatever spectacle I might behold there seemed preferable to that which my imagination suggested ; besides, the presence of my companion gave me courage.

“Certainly not,” answered John, positively. “My mother is there, remember, who would certainly let us know if there was anything amiss, and who would not like being woke up, when once she has got to sleep in that arm-chair, I promise you.

I'll come and look at your coffin, however, with a great deal of pleasure."

I own I was not sorry for his escort as I returned to my room, nor was I the first to lift that valance again. "Why, my good fellow, you have literally found a mare's nest!" chuckled John. "It's the case that holds the mace and things; my father, as you know, being mayor this year."

John was quite right; the Kirkdale regalia had been deposited under the head of my bed, for want of a better place of accommodation for it, and it had given me a pretty fright. Rather to my astonishment, however, John did not rally me about my foolish fears. "It was really enough to give you a turn," said he, "with your mind so full of morbid ideas; but I do hope you will now dismiss them for good and all. I would not say anything about having gone into Uncle Alec's room, if I were you; my mother would be sure to reproach herself—which, with her, you know, means pitching into

other people—for having left him alone, and with the door open.”

“Very good,” said I; “then she shall not know anything about it.” But at the same time I made up my mind that Mr. Wilde should know all. My superstitious fears (if such I can call them) were, however, allayed with the morning light; and before midday I had the satisfaction of hearing from my uncle’s lips that, though the sick man showed more of lethargy than on the last occasion on which he had seen him, he looked by no means like one on the point of dissolution.

In the afternoon came the doctor, as usual, and he, too, had a somewhat improved report to give of his patient. If Gertrude was not positively better, she was not worse; and things had now got to that pass with her that even so much of good tidings was welcome. The shadow of coming evil seemed to lift from my mind a little, as the mist lifts from the mountain and displays a glint

of sunshine. I felt sufficiently relieved for the moment to consult Mr. Wilde about my own health. I was nervous and full of morbid fancies, I said; and when he asked, "What fancies?" I narrated my visit to Brother Alec's chamber and its results. He listened with great attention, which was a sure sign with him that the matter appeared to be of some importance, for he, professionally, was very impatient of trifles.

"Are you quite sure you did go into the room, Sheddon?"

"Quite certain; and also that I touched the sick man's shoulder."

"You mean the bed-clothes about his shoulder."

"Well, yes; but he must have felt me touch him; of that I am confident, and also little less so that he was not asleep." As for the rest, I allowed that I was too excited and alarmed to speak to details.

"When did you see Mr. Alexander last? I mean, before last night," was his next inquiry.

“Not for three months; none but his own family — not even the servants, and now, of course, not Gertrude—are admitted to his room. But my uncle has seen him this morning, and he describes him as no worse. He was even able, although with difficulty, to sign the receipt.”

“What receipt?”

“Oh, I forgot; that ought to be a secret; however, it will not be revealed by you, I know.” And thereupon I told him about Mr. Raeburn the elder having become a life annuitant.

“That accounts for the care that is taken of him, you see,” observed I, in conclusion.

“I see,” said Mr. Wilde; but his chin was in hand, and his thoughts, I could see, were engaged on some other subject.

“And have you had any other morbid feelings or fancies, Sheddon?”

“Nothing of any consequence.”

“I am the best judge of that, my lad,”

answered Mr. Wilde, gravely. "Pray tell me everything without concealment."

"Well, the truth is, I have been so anxious and depressed about Gertrude of late, that I have sometimes seemed to myself to be going out of my mind. I have been in that sort of state, that I have scarcely known whether to trust my own eyes; just as in the case of Mr. Alexander, last night."

"You have seen something else then? What was it?"

"It was something of a very different kind, yet equally strange; indeed, so much so, that, though the occurrence happened in broad daylight, I can scarcely believe in its reality. On the morning of the day before yesterday, when poor Gerty became so much worse, you remember, I happened to rise earlier than usual, and, finding no one in the breakfast-room, I went into what is called the library to fetch a book. The room is seldom or never used, and only

contains one small bookcase, which stands behind the door. While looking over it I heard a female step cross the hall and enter the room, but, concluding it to be one of the servants come, perhaps, to dust the furniture, I did not turn round or give any notice of my presence. Immediately afterwards I heard a sort of tearing noise, and, looking up, I perceived Mrs. Raeburn stooping over the horsehair sofa, and, as I thought, pulling the hairs out. Was it not strange?"

Mr. Wilde's expressive face was looking volumes of intense interest. "It was very strange," said he, moving to the door of the drawing-room, in which we were, and quietly turning the key; "so strange that I should not like anybody but myself to hear you tell the tale."

His tone was so serious that I knew at once he had a doubt of my sanity.

"No, Mr. Wilde," said I, "I know what I am saying, and also that it is the truth.

The thing certainly happened, though to me, who knew how careful Mrs. Raeburn is about her furniture, it seemed inconceivable that she should thus destroy it with her own hands. I waited quite quietly where I was, for I judged she would not have relished my being a witness of such proceedings, and saw her put about half a pound of the horsehair, as I should judge, into her pocket, and with it she left the room, without suspecting that it had contained a spectator. I examined the sofa afterwards; the stuffing had been abstracted from it underneath, but I found the hole through which it had been taken. She means to make fishing-tackle out of it, perhaps,* or, at all events, something by which she may turn an honest penny. Yet you cannot wonder, as I have said, that I scarcely believed my own eyes."

* This occurrence happened, it must be remembered, years before the period when Mrs. Raeburn might have been credited with making her own frisettes or chignons.—H. S.

Mr. Wilde made no reply.

“Can I see this sofa, Harry?” asked he, in his usual quiet tones.

“Certainly,” I said, and led the way into the little library, where my companion took the same precaution as before of locking the door. Then he knelt down under the sofa and examined it carefully.

“There has been a cut here, and here, and here,” observed he, “though they have all been neatly sewn up again. Notice what care, too, has been taken to distribute the loss, so that the absence of the stuffing should not be noticed.”

“That is only what I should have expected,” remarked I. “Mrs. Raeburn is a most economical housewife, and very clever with her fingers.”

“Not only with her fingers, Sheddon,” returned Mr. Wilde, rising from his knees, and looking as grave as one upon whose lips a prayer yet lingers. “She is as cun-

ning as the Fiend himself; and yet, thanks to you, her wickedness is, I believe, about to be discovered, and she has at last been delivered into my hands."

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. RAEBURN'S BOWER.

THOSE words of Mr. Wilde, so unexpected, so suggestive of I know not what atrocity, and spoken with all the severity of a judge who is about to punish, astounded me.

"What wickedness has this woman done?" cried I, the picture of Mrs. Raeburn's steadfast figure, sitting by Brother Alec's bed, recurring involuntarily to my mind once more and filling me with dark misgivings.

"I will tell you, Sheddon, but not here nor now. Hush! what is that?" cried he, holding up his hand for silence. "I hear a footstep in the hall."

I opened the door a little, as noiselessly

as I could, and through the chink beheld one of the servants carrying a covered plate upstairs, doubtless for one of the two sick folks.

“I would give much to get that plate,” murmured Mr. Wilde, wistfully. “No ! no ! not yet,” added he, as I was about to rush out and possess myself of it at all hazards. “Wait a bit !”

We heard the maid knock softly at the door of Brother Alec’s sitting-room. Immediately afterwards Mrs. Raeburn’s step was heard passing into her room. She stayed there for a minute or two, and then returned to Brother Alec’s apartment. “Remain here till I come back,” exclaimed my companion. He ran upstairs very quickly, yet without noise, and, impatient as I was for his return, I scarcely missed him before he was once more with me.

“You have not got the plate ?” said I excitedly.

“I have some of the contents, however, which are sufficient for my purpose.”

Then I saw he had an envelope in his hand filled with fragments of a fricasseed chicken. He spread these out on a piece of paper, and, taking a magnifying-glass from his pocket, examined them attentively. As he did so his grave face seemed to light up, not joyfully, but with a sort of fierce exultation.

"It is as I suspected," I heard him murmur below his breath.

"What have you suspected? What have you found?" inquired I.

"Oh, nothing," said he quietly, "except that the pepper is rather too coarse and large."

"Great Heaven!" cried I, alarmed more even than before by the bitter irony of his tone, "you don't mean to tell me that anyone is being poisoned in this house?"

"God forbid, my dear Sheddon," answered my companion earnestly. "I have discovered something, it is true, but nothing that you can even guess at. What it is

must not be revealed to anyone at present. If you knew what I know, others in this house would read the secret in your face, and they must not read it."

"But what can I do, Mr. Wilde? I feel I must do something, or I shall go mad. You have hinted at too much not to tell me all."

"You shall hear all in good time, my dear lad; but at present, beyond all things, it is necessary for you to be calm. When I asked of you the other day to keep a watch upon Mrs. Raeburn's actions, I noticed that though, since it was for Gertrude's sake, you did consent, it brought the colour to your cheeks, as if you would have said, 'Does this man wish me then to be a spy?' I have now to ask you to do something—not dangerous nor difficult; for, if that were all, you would not hesitate—but at which your sense of honour will still more revolt. Is it possible, Sheddon, think you, between now and dusk for you to gain admittance

to Mrs. Raeburn's room without being perceived by anyone, and to search it thoroughly?"

"It is possible, no doubt," said I; "but unless I am convinced that there is a justification for such a course——"

"There is not only justification, lad," interrupted Mr. Wilde, earnestly, "but a necessity; it is the only certain and immediate means that I can think of for averting from this house a very terrible catastrophe. That astounds you, as well it may, but it is nevertheless the fact. I am not one to speak idle words; but, if you have not sufficient confidence in me to do my bidding, I must employ other agents, less fastidious but also less secure. Mrs. Raeburn's room shall be searched before the sun sets; on that I am resolved. It rests with you whether that search shall be made by strangers, which must needs cause a public scandal, or by yourself, which will be known to me alone."

“I will search it, Mr. Wilde !” exclaimed I, with desperation, “since it needs must be so. But what am I to look for ?”

“I cannot tell you that for certain,” was the unexpected reply. “It will, I think, be some sharp instrument. No weapon,” added he, perceiving that I shuddered, “yet something that will seem as much out of place in a lady’s room as any weapon.”

I nodded in acquiescence, though I did not understand him, and was too thunder-struck to speak.

“Search the room thoroughly,” he continued, “and if you find this thing, bring it to my house after dark ; but, at all events, come thither to-night without letting any one suspect you of doing so. Then, lad, you shall know all.”

With that he left the room abruptly, and without another word. Ere I had recovered from the astonishment caused by his request, or began to regret my promise to perform it, he had quitted the house, and

I heard the ring of his horse's hoofs upon the wintry ground. In what a terrible position did I find myself! That Mr. Wilde was a sagacious, as well as a thoroughly honest gentleman, I was very well convinced; but what if his sagacity should in this case be mistaken? Nothing might be amiss, perhaps, after all; and, even if it were, it was possible that Mrs. Raeburn might not be the offender. Yet I had pledged myself to steal, like a thief, into that lady's room—she being my hostess—and peep and pry until I had found something which indeed might be there; but which seemed about as likely to be so as an electric-machine or a wind-mill. Still, those words, "It is the only certain and immediate means of averting from this house a very terrible catastrophe," coming from the lips of such a man as Mr. Wilde, had too tremendous a significance to be set aside by any considerations of my personal dignity. The sense, too, of some foul play in connection with Brother Alec

still haunted me, and gave gravity to his words. Besides, I had undertaken the matter, and there was now nothing for me but to go through with it. Luncheon had long been over. The attorney and his son were in the office; the servants were all below-stairs; Mrs. Raeburn, I knew, was in close attendance upon her brother-in-law; the opportunity was as good now as it would ever be. Moreover, the more I thought about the enterprise the less I liked it, like a bather who stands shivering on the river-brink, and, therefore, I judged it best to set about it at once. Listening cautiously in the hall, then, and hearing no one stirring on the floor above, I ran softly upstairs, and, instead, as usual, of making for my own apartment, darted into that chamber which was always called Mrs. Raeburn's, although, I suppose, in law at least, the attorney might have had some common claim to it. He had a dressing-room, however, of about five feet by four, that was

all his own, and which communicated with the bed-room on the north side, as did Gertrude's apartment on the east; though that, of course, had also a door of its own, which opened upon the passage. This latter was now used only by the servants, Mrs. Raeburn invariably visiting the sick girl through the former means of communication. She had, I conjectured, just been to see her patient; and there was, therefore, small probability of her return for some little time; still, the idea of it alarmed me to the last degree. Hitherto, I had never feared her, because I had had nothing to reproach myself with, and was free to entertain my own opinion of her demerits; but, in the present case, I felt no such independence. Whatever wicked schemes she might be devising with respect to her invalid guest, I had myself no knowledge of them, and, if discovered, would be utterly without excuse for my most discreditable position. As I entered the room, and

softly closed the door behind me, I found, to my horror, that it was already occupied. Before me stood a human form, in a crouching attitude, and with features expressing the greatest discomfiture and dismay. I started, and it started too, when I perceived that it was but the counterfeit presentment of myself in the tall pier-glass which had so often reflected Mrs. Raeburn's stately form. If it had been that lady herself, she might have knocked me down with a feather; and it was quite probable that she would have done so, but with some much more formidable weapon. There was a large club in the corner of the room which would have served such a purpose to a nicety; the attorney had shown it to me, on one occasion, as his "sedative" for burglars, it being heavily loaded at the knob with lead. The other objects of furniture were of the same kind as I had seen elsewhere in "best bed-rooms." Beside the pier-glass there was a handsome mirror, let into

the wardrobe, which gave me another "turn" as I passed by it. I searched that wardrobe thoroughly, pausing every moment to listen for a footfall, just as other young gentlemen do, I suppose, when engaged in their first burglary. Not a sound was to be heard in the passage; nor from Gertrude's room, which, indeed, was shut off with a baize door besides the ordinary one. I even climbed a chair, and swept the top of the wardrobe with my hand; it was singularly free from the dust that generally collects in such a place; for if Mrs. Raeburn was deficient in the first of virtues—godliness—she had reason to boast herself, in all matters of the house, of the second—cleanliness—as her servants knew to their cost. I peeped over the canopy of the four-post bedstead, taking as much care to erase the impression of my foot upon the bed-clothes as an Indian who has foes after him on the war-trail. Then I examined every cupboard, pigeon-hole, and drawer.

No matter what I found—it was not

what I sought. I became for the first time acquainted with many articles of a lady's toilette, which it would be a breach of confidence to the sex to allude to more particularly ; but though some of them were very curious, not one could, by the liveliest imagination, be assimilated to an instrument that "would seem as much out of place in a lady's room as any weapon."

Throughout these investigations, terror, lest I should be discovered by the proprietress of the apartment, made my limbs tremble and my heart go pit-a-pat. Still I went through with the whole disgraceful business as conscientiously as though animated by the glow of duty. I even turned up the carpet at the corners, and looked under that. It was all to no purpose ; I had evidently been sent on a fool's errand. Convinced of this, it struck me that I would leave the room by means of the dressing-closet, since, if observed in that proceeding, I might make up some kind of explanation, however feeble, to account

for it. It would be, anyhow, more easy to frame an excuse for being found in the attorney's private apartments than in that of his wife. I therefore took that course. Mr. Raeburn's dressing-room was a very comfortless one, not boasting even of a carpet, and there was a conspicuous absence of the neatness so remarkable in the larger room. Its master, I knew, hated to have any of the papers in his office dusted or displaced, and here, also, were the evidences of this characteristic. The floor was strewn with boots and books. The plain deal shelves that lined the walls were filled—the lower with clothes, the higher ones with tape-tied papers. The latter, to judge by the layers of dust about them, had been untouched for years. I mounted the only chair there was, and ran my eye over these things. At the corner of the topmost shelf the dust did not lie so thick in one place, but had been swept off as though by the passage of some object,

probably the owner's hand. And here, behind the papers, there was a something wrapped up in chamois leather, which, when I touched it, rattled with a metallic sound.

I trembled, but no longer with apprehensions upon my own account. A thrill of horror—born of the conviction that Mr. Wilde had not set me on this search for naught; that I held in my hand the evidence of some desperate purpose, perhaps even of some dark crime in which my hostess was engaged—ran through my frame. I scarcely needed the testimony of my eyes, when, as I turned back the covering of soft leather, they fell upon a delicate instrument of steel, which, though shaped like a chopping-machine, was of such microscopic dimensions that it could have chopped no meat, but only food for fairies!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE NARROWING OF THE NET.

SMALL as the instrument was of which I had so fortunately possessed myself, just as my quest seemed hopeless, its shape did not admit of being placed in the pocket; I huddled it up, therefore, as well as I could, in the breast of my coat, and fled downstairs into the library, where I concealed it, until the already deepening dusk of evening should permit me to carry it unperceived to Mr. Wilde's. To my own room I positively did not dare remove it, since that would have necessitated my passing Brother Alec's apartment, in one of which I knew Mrs. Raeburn to be. It was not fear that I

now experienced in regard to her; if what the doctor had hinted was correct, I had discovered the proof of something which should put her in fear of me rather—but a certain loathing and abhorrence, begotten partly of my original dislike of her, and partly of the remembrance of that scene of the previous night in the sick man's room, for the terrors of which I somehow held her accountable.

As soon as it grew dark I left the Priory, taking the instrument with me just as it was, but well concealed in the folds of my winter cloak.

“You have found it,” were Mr. Wilde's first eager words, when we were left alone together in his parlour. “It was a chopping-machine, very small, and of sharpest steel, was it not?”

“You have described it as well as if you had seen it,” said I, producing it from my cloak. He looked as pleased as a child who has guessed a riddle.

“And yet there are some people, Sheddon, who scoff at science!” exclaimed he vehemently; “who tell us that the Creator, who has endowed man with intelligence, is averse to its exercise, even in His own behalf. He has helped us in this search, no doubt; but unless a miracle had been vouchsafed to us, how, without yonder book, should I have ever suspected the means by which this crime was to have been consummated, and thereby been able to avert it?”

I was wholly unable to account for this outburst, which had relation, doubtless, to that difference of opinion in religious matters that had lost Mr. Wilde his intended wife, and with which I did not till afterwards become acquainted; but at that moment I was only curious to discover the matter which I myself, though as a mere instrument, had brought to so successful an issue.

“I know nothing as yet, remember, Mr. Wilde, of any crime,” pleaded I. “You promised me to tell all——”

“I will, I will, lad; but stay one moment;” he rang the bell for his servant. “Go to the Infirmary, and take this note to Nurse Hopkins—the woman who came down from town last week; and in the meantime, leave orders that, until she arrives, we are not to be disturbed by anybody. It is a long story, Sheddon, that I have to tell you, and one that must needs have no listener—as I hope—beside yourself; if others force me to make it public, it will be at their own peril, and I think they are too wise. Not another day, not another hour, at all events, shall Miss Floyd’s life be risked, to save them from the gallows.”

“Gertrude’s life be risked!” repeated I, in horror. “Is it her life, then, that is menaced? Until this moment, I deemed that this foul play, at which you hinted, was directed against Mr. Alexander!”

“I know it,” was my companion’s quiet rejoinder; “and finding your suspicions take that channel, I did not divert them to the

true one. If you had thought it possible, nay, probable, as I have done for months, that Gertrude Floyd, the being most dear to you on earth, was being done to death slowly, but certainly, by the hand of her own relative and hostess, yet without one grain of proof to support such a charge—life, under that roof, would have been intolerable, impossible for you; yet it was necessary, you see, that you should remain there, and by doing so the crime, though late, still in time has been discovered, and the catastrophe averted.”

“You are sure that it is in time, Mr. Wilde?” interrupted I, passionately; “that the precious moments are not being wasted, even now, while we are speaking?”

“I am quite sure, my dear lad. Without this talisman here”—he pointed to the machine—“the wicked witch has no power to work her will, nor will she discover its loss, until she is rendered in all other respects powerless. Listen then, without

fear, to a story that, indeed, is grim enough, but which can now have no tragical termination.

“ When I was first consulted, nearly a year ago, by Miss Floyd, there were circumstances in her case, though I made no mention of them at the time, which puzzled me exceedingly ; her symptoms, though common enough in some respects, suggested in others those produced by the presence of some irritant poison. These, however, were in a very incipient stage, and on the patient’s removal, at my recommendation, to Stanbrook, they disappeared almost immediately. This rapid recovery, which you all hailed with such natural delight, was by no means satisfactory to me. Had her ailment been of an ordinary description, she would have more gradually become convalescent, whereas, if it were caused by some noxious drug or other substance, the administration of which had been intermitted, she would probably have recovered at once, as in fact she did.

The nature of Mr. Alexander Raeburn's illness became such as to give me no further excuse for attendance on him on his return to the Priory, which removed Miss Floyd from under my professional eye. However, since I heard nothing of a relapse in her case, I had begun to think I had been mistaken in my ideas regarding it, until about five months ago, when you requested me again to visit her, since she complained of the same ailments, when my suspicions at once reasserted themselves, and with renewed vigour. I must tell you, too, that they had even then a living object; they had originally been turned towards Mrs. Raeburn, by certain vague expressions dropped from her brother-in-law's lips at Stanbrook, and which, under other circumstances, I should probably have set down as one of the vagaries of a waning brain. 'When I am gone,' he once observed to me, 'take care of Gerty.'"

"He used the very same words, Mr. Wilde, to me!" cried I, "and at about the same time."

“Very likely, though to one in your position they were more natural, and would, therefore, have less significance. It was then that the poor old man began to feel that his intelligence was departing from him, and he wished probably, while it still remained with him, to give us warning of the danger that menaced his favourite.”

“But how could he have known the danger?”

“He did not know it, but he had, doubtless, reasons unknown to us for vaguely suspecting it. In the first place, he hated his sister-in-law, and believed her capable (as I do) of committing any atrocity; and secondly, seeing him growing day by day into his second childhood, she was perhaps more imprudent in expressing her feelings towards Gertrude; at all events, he had discovered them to be hostile; and he knew that, after his own demise, his brother Mark would be her heir-at-law.”

“That is true,” cried I, a flood of light

seeming here to pour in upon me. "He, doubtless, feared foul play for her, since, when speaking of himself, before he had made his will, he told me with his own lips that he durst not pass a night at the Priory under the same roof as Mrs. Raeburn while her husband was his heir!"

"The vague words dropped by Mrs. Raeburn," continued Mr. Wilde, "fell, in my case, upon ears prepared for them; and my suspicions ripened to certainty when you came to me with the news of Miss Floyd's second seizure. I felt convinced in my own mind that there was some evil agency at work, not resident in her own constitution, and I recognised the agent in Mrs. Raeburn. You remember how I bade you watch that woman, under pretence of convincing ourselves that Miss Floyd received sufficient attention at her hands; whereas I really feared lest her hostess should pay her a too assiduous service. In particular, my sus-

picion was—and it has been confirmed—that Mrs. Raeburn prepared her meals.”

“That very idea crossed my own mind!” exclaimed I, excitedly; “yet, when I expressed it to yourself this afternoon, you positively affirmed it to be groundless.”

“You asked me if anyone was being poisoned, Sheddon,” answered my companion gravely, “and I told you that that was not the case; nor was it so. If it had been so, I should have discovered it long ago. Neither myself, however, nor the doctor from London, whom, as you know, I compelled them to send for, could come to any definite conclusion on the matter. We knew only that the patient was growing worse and worse without any adequate cause. The tests which I applied with the view of discovering the precise nature of the disease all failed. I read again every work that bore upon the subject of irritant poisons, without giving any clue to the mystery; and among them I read this book.”

Here he took down a small volume of some antiquity from the bookshelf, and opened it at a place which he had marked.

“This is a scientific treatise upon Toxicology, written too long ago to be of much service, but it contains an appendix which will never grow out of date, since its contents are obtained direct from the great storehouse of human nature, which, like the Creator himself, is the same yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow. The author narrates in it certain professional experiences of his own, one of which has an especial interest for ourselves at this moment. He describes how a certain person attempted the life of a rich man by ‘chopping horsehair exceedingly small and mixing it with his food.’ You see now that this has been the device pursued with respect to poor Miss Floyd. I myself only realised it a few hours ago, when your mention of having seen Mrs. Raeburn taking the horsehair out of the sofa

at once reminded me of this anecdote, and placed me on the right track. Yonder piece of chicken, part of what was intended for Miss Floyd's mid-day meal, was sprinkled with horsehair, as my microscope revealed. She was sleeping when I took it from her room, into which I had just seen it taken by Mrs. Raeburn's hands. If further proof were needed, here is horsehair upon the very instrument itself, with respect to which long impunity has, doubtless, made her careless. The hand of constant crime, like that of labour, loses its 'dainty sense.'"

Thus spoke Mr. Wilde, with all the calmness of one pursuing a philosophical investigation, while horror seemed to be freezing the very marrow of my bones. His own nature was stirred to its very depths with indignation, but, as he afterwards explained to me, he feigned this stoical calm for my own sake; for my nerves, already shattered by the events of the past night, were in no state for the reception

of such a piece of intelligence, though it was impossible for him to avoid making me his confidant.

“Why do we lose time?” cried I, rousing myself with an effort as from some hideous dream, and springing to my feet. “Why not warn Gertrude at once? Why not arrest this wicked woman?”

“For many reasons, my good lad,” was the quiet reply, “but mainly for Gertrude’s sake. Should she come to know, in her present debilitated condition, that she has been tended for months by one who, in the person of her friend and hostess, was dooming her to death, the shock might destroy her altogether. Do not suppose, my dear lad, that I am indifferent to your distress and anxiety,” continued my companion, laying his hand upon my shoulder, and speaking very kindly; “my solicitude for this dear young lady is only second to your own. Have confidence in me as heretofore, and, believe me, all shall be well.

For the present, Miss Floyd is safe, and in a few minutes one will be here in whom I have implicit trust, and who will henceforth take her in sole charge. There is the door-bell; she is here."

A middle-aged, grave-looking female, whom Mr. Wilde addressed as Mrs. Hopkins, was presently ushered into the room.

"The situation," said he, "of which I told you as likely to offer itself is now at your service. You have made the preparations of which I wrote, and are ready to accept it?"

"At once, sir."

"This is a rare and valuable specimen of womankind, Harry," observed the doctor, smiling, "who never uses four words when three will do.—Go downstairs, Mrs. Hopkins, for five minutes, and then I will give you your instructions."

When the nurse was gone the doctor sat down and wrote a letter, during which I waited very impatiently, for it seemed to

me monstrous that he should waste time in correspondence at such a crisis.

“Whom on earth are you writing to, Mr. Wilde?” inquired I at last.

“To Mrs. Raeburn.”

“To Mrs. Raeburn!” echoed I, almost as much disgusted as surprised. “How is it possible you can do that?”

“It is a mere act of civility, Sheddon. I am about to return her this chopping-machine, by favour of Mrs. Hopkins, a hospital nurse, who will be henceforth placed in sole charge of my patient, Miss Gertrude Floyd. Mrs. Raeburn is far too clever not to appreciate, at once, the entire situation; but I have added a hint to the effect that she must leave this place within twenty-four hours. I do not spare her on her own account, you may be sure; but there is no middle course between this method of proceeding and the calling in of the police, which would mean ruin and shame to the innocent as well as the guilty.

And now, my lad, do you go back home with an easy mind, for it is just as well that you should be at the Priory when Mrs. Hopkins arrives there, to see what comes of it."

"But what will come of it?" inquired I, anxiously. "I mean as respects Mrs. Raeburn?"

"That is her look-out," answered Mr. Wilde, sternly. "Within the next twenty-four hours her fate is in her own hands; after that, if she has not complied with my demand, she must take the consequences, which she will be able to estimate better than you or I. Stop! there is one thing more, Sheddon, in which I shall have to trust to your discretion. If Miss Floyd requires professional aid—of which there is little chance, however—you will of course at once send for me; but if Mrs. Raeburn should need a doctor, let some one else be sent for. Do you understand?"

I nodded, thinking in my simplicity that

his meaning was that his indignation against this woman was such that he could not trust himself even to minister professionally to her needs ; then, throwing my cloak about me, I ran home by the shortest way.

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